

UNIVERSIDADE DE LISBOA

FACULDADE DE LETRAS



**WOMEN’S PROPHETIC SPEECH IN THE  
POPULAR LITERATURE OF EARLY  
CHRISTIANITY**

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2019

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## **DEDICATION**

To Lilian, my mother, and to Maria Lectícia, my best friend, the women who supported me throughout the accomplishment of my master's studies. Thank you for being my greatest admirers and motivators.

## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

First, I would like to express my gratitude to Dr. Ana Maria S.A. Rodrigues for being always open and available as an advisor and as the director of the Graduate Program in History and Culture of Religions. I also thank her for fostering Women's and Gender Studies at the Faculty of Letters of the University of Lisbon.

Secondly, I thank Dr. João Luís Inglês for introducing me to the wonders and complexities of early Christianity during his classes and for co-advising this thesis.

I also gratefully acknowledge the funding received towards my master from the Directorate General for Higher Education in Portugal (Direção-Geral do Ensino Superior/DGES) Scholarship.

## ABSTRACT

This dissertation is an analysis of women's prophetic experiences (with an emphasis in inspired speeches) in early Christian environments throughout four texts from the second and third centuries C.E: *The Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas*, the *Acts of Thomas*, the *Acts of Paul*, and the *Gospel of Mary of Magdala*.

The study establishes connections between miraculous and wondrous events and prophecy. The study also questions how inspired speech relates to women's public speech and autonomy. Specifically, it presents the consequences of the perception of agency as human or divine; the rhetoric of women's prophecy, and the importance of public inspired speech for early Christian discourse.

**Keywords:** Christian women, prophecy, gender, public speech, rhetoric

## RESUMO

Esta dissertação analisa experiências proféticas femininas no Cristianismo antigo, com ênfase em discursos inspirados, através de quatro textos dos séculos 2 e 3 D.C: *Martírio de Perpétua e Felicidade*, *Atos de Tomé*, *Atos de Paulo e Tecla* e *Evangelho de Maria Madalena*.

O estudo estabelece conexões entre fenômenos miraculosos e divinamente inspirados e a prática da profecia e questiona como o discurso divinamente inspirado se relaciona com a participação das mulheres na esfera pública no Antigo Mediterrâneo e seu exercício de autonomia. Especificamente, discute as consequências da percepção da agência feminina como humana ou divina; a retórica da profecia feminina; e a importância do discurso público inspirado para o discurso cristão antigo enquanto ferramenta de inserção desta nova religião no Império Romano.

**Palavras-chave:** Mulheres cristãs, profecia, gênero, discurso público, retórica.

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## Introduction

As a novice scholar, the common representation of early Christianity as a mythical age when women enjoyed a particular level of freedom promptly got my attention. Why would early Christians have allowed women to be preachers and missionaries, considering women's restrictive sociocultural context in the Roman Empire? How did this freedom occur in practice? Why did this scenario later go under a process of contestation and subjection of women's autonomy?

When exploring the works of José Maria Blázquez, Elizabeth Clark, and Margaret Y. MacDonald, I found satisfactory answers to some of these questionings.<sup>1</sup> However, doubts about women's practices remained. What would have been the preferred religious practices of early Christian women? How were these practices connected to the alleged freedom of the early centuries of Christian history? Scholarship mostly points towards the urban circulation of widows, women's associations, and the emancipation of male tutelage through chastity. Still, reading literature reviews and some apocryphal texts, stories about women with wondrous experiences caught my attention.

Although less frequent and shorter than narratives about virgins, widows, and ascetics (yet many times mixed with these), early wondrous stories present women that spoke in public on the margins of proto-orthodox attacks. If they were not officially admitted in church offices and had institutional and symbolic recognition, they still had very practical freedom. They made public statements, preached, taught, and entered the public (predominantly male) sphere protected by the shield of divine justification. If God approved them and spoke through their mouth, who would dare to silence them – and

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<sup>1</sup> Alvar and Blázquez, *Cristianismo primitivo y religiones mistericas*; Clark and Richardson, *Women and Religion*; Clark, "Holy Women, Holy Words: Early Christian Women, Social History, and the 'Linguistic Turn'"; Clark, "The Lady Vanishes"; MacDonald, *Early Christian Women and Pagan Opinion*.

therefore, God? Did divine agency serve as an alibi to women's own human interests and actions?

In addition to divinely inspired speeches, women stories in early Christian literature included dreams, visions, sensorial experiences, and physical experiences. Such diversity brought me the task to find suitable terminology and delimitate an object of study. The uniqueness of the experiences presented in early Christian literature prompted my analysis of women's prophetic experiences.

This thesis analyzes women's prophetic experiences (with an emphasis in inspired speeches) in an early Christian environment through four texts from the second and third centuries: the *Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas*, the *Acts of Thomas*, the *Acts of Paul*, and the *Gospel of Mary of Magdala*. These texts were produced in the Late Antique society where these types of experiences were prolific and taken very seriously and where activities related to public speech – such as rhetoric, preaching, and teaching – was eminently male. Therefore, I observed how the crossing of these factors influenced the production and the perception of women's divinely inspired speeches.

Specifically, I tried to understand if some of the women in popular early Christian literature were considered prophets; if prophecy served as a justification for women's autonomy; the consequences of the perception of agency as human or divine; the rhetoric of women's prophecy and the relations between inspired and public speech. Also, I sought understanding in what extent conclusions taken from literary sources reflect historical situations.

Presently, there are many studies about early Christian women's practices and about the charismatic authority of women. However, there is a current lack of studies concerning the intersection of prophetic action with early Christian women's authority and autonomy. Most studies on this topic focus on Montanism, a movement in which the

work of women prophets was evident in more prolific sources of study.<sup>2</sup> Additionally, significant work has been done on other prophetic movements receptive to women, such as Priscillianism<sup>3</sup>, and female prophecy in a biblical context.<sup>4</sup> There are also studies about prophecy in the Apocrypha, but not from a gendered perspective or comparing different texts.<sup>5</sup> I believe that this study will contribute to current literature and help fill the gap in early Christian women's authority and autonomy as they relate to prophesy.

Throughout my review, I did not find any work that explicitly addressed women's prophecy within popular early Christian literature. This could be because this is a period with little existing factual data and, therefore, challenging in extracting historical information or it may be because women are not named prophets in these texts. The label is missing even though their experiences match precisely the description of ancient pagan authors about supernatural experimentations that belong to the realm of prophecy.<sup>6</sup>

Terminology issues are discussed in Chapter 1. Before classifying the experiences I examined as prophecy, I searched for its representation and naming by notable scholars of Christianity and Judaism, such as David E. Aune and Jan Bremmer, and also in compilations of Greek, Eastern Mediterranean, and Near Eastern scholarly works.<sup>7</sup> I found a satisfactory name in Laura Nasrallah's work. Nasrallah is a professor of New Testament Criticism and Interpretation at Yale University who researches issues of

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<sup>2</sup> Hypolitus *Refutation of all Heresies* 8.12, Ephiphanius *Medicine Box* 48, and 49.1-3 and Eusebius *History of the Church* 5.16 comment on the Montanist prophets Maximilla and Priscilla. Most evidence of Montanism comes from hostile sources.

<sup>3</sup> Burrus, *The Making of a Heretic* is a work about the Priscilianist movement on the Iberic Peninsula.

<sup>4</sup> Marshall, *Women Praying and Prophesying in Corinth* is a recent work about women prophecy in the Pauline letters. Nasrallah, *An Ecstasy of Folly*, also comments on I Corinthians and controversies about prophecy and gender.

<sup>5</sup> That is the case of the series edited by Breemer, *Studies on the Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles*.

<sup>6</sup> Which is the case made by Nasrallah, *An Ecstasy of Folly*.

<sup>7</sup> Aune, *Prophecy in Early Christianity and the Ancient Mediterranean World*; Bremmer, *Maidens, Magic and Martyrs in Early Christianity*; Huffmon, Kaltner, and Stulman, *Inspired Speech*; Kienzle and Walker, *Women Preachers and Prophets through Two Millennia of Christianity*; Stökl and Carvalho, *Prophets Male and Female*.

gender, race, and status in early Christian literature and archaeological remains of the Mediterranean world. In a past study about the ancient perception of the nature of the soul, Nasrallah grouped a variety of manifestations – dreams, ecstasies, visions, augury, divination, possessions, inspired speeches during trance or not – as prophetic experiences. Her understanding embraced both pagan and Jewish imaginary and emphasized a diversity that does not confine prophecy to an official religious speech. Yet, it was the work of Martti Nissinen that provided me with the strongest framework for my analysis.<sup>8</sup>

Nissinen is known as an expert of the prophetic phenomenon in the ancient Eastern Mediterranean. He is a professor of Old Testament Studies at the University of Helsinki and has several positions of trust in academic communities, for example, the Society of Biblical Literature, the Finnish Exegetical Society and the Society for Old Testament Study. His research interests include gender issues. In his studies, he has examined individual features and potential relationships among Greek, Ancient Near Eastern, and Biblical prophecy.

By conceptualizing prophecy as an object of academic study, Nissinen proposed the adaptation of a modern religious concept to a theoretical definition that can be used in comparative approaches without sacrificing the particularities of distinct religious traditions. More specifically, he discussed the constitution of specific traits of prophecy, such as divine and human instrumental or independent agency. The organization and clarity of his framework are unparalleled in the consulted biography and have proven very useful for my work. It is particularly helpful to identify prophecy on non-labeled sources, such as those not backed up by any religious authority (which seemed important considering I deal with texts or representations at the margin of the Great Church). At the

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<sup>8</sup> Nissinen, “What Is Prophecy? An Ancient Near Eastern Perspective”; Nissinen, “Gender and Prophetic Agency in the Ancient Near East and in Greece.”

same time, his conceptual framework allowed me to focus on discourse as an essential part of prophecy, understood as a communication process.

Chapter 2 details the context of production and the specificities of the texts that I chose to work with. This choice is due to the observation that each text individually portrays several mystical, miraculous, and wondrous experiences. It is also due to an intention to perceive early Christian prophecy broadly in relation to its social context. Therefore, I found it useful to observe diverse, yet approximate sources. To bring them together, I used Peter Brown's conception of the Late Antique Mediterranean as a uniform cultural world that shared symbolic and intellectual imagery, despite the existing local differences.<sup>9</sup> His work helped me perceive the extent I could apply general understandings to texts whose particularities of production, circulation, and audience are scarcely known.

The fact that the *Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas* is a historical account and that the apocryphal acts and the *Gospel of Mary of Magdala* are not, inspired me the concern to not easily make historical assumptions over literary constructs. Even Perpetua's account, widely accepted as historical, has issues concerning the historicity of the report since it was later edited, and martyrdom literature tends to exaggerate or act creatively over historical events.<sup>10</sup> The issue is more complex on the apocryphal Acts, whose literary studies have repeatedly indicated a mix of fiction and intended truth.<sup>11</sup> While their structure resembles that of the novel in its motifs and characterizations, there is a historical background in the habits and environments they portray. The *Gospel of Mary of Magdala*, in turn, lies in a debate between a supposed falsification of the apostolic tradition and a simple representation of alternative Christian beliefs. Scholarship has

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<sup>9</sup> Brown, *The World of Late Antiquity*.

<sup>10</sup> Moss, *Ancient Christian Martyrdom*, 8–12.

<sup>11</sup> Cameron, *Christianity and the Rhetoric of Empire*, 116–18.

focused more on the use of the writing rather than on the actual occurrence of its accounts.<sup>12</sup>

In addition to what has been stated, the fact that early Christian texts are not a passive repository of women's experiences does not disqualify them as objects of academic study. It merely changes the questions that we should address when looking to them for the social logic of a text and disputes of power implied in within, as Elizabeth Clark noted.<sup>13</sup> Clark is a foundational feminist historian of early Christian Studies and her work on theories and methods was fundamental to my intellectual reflection on this thesis.

Ross Kraemer's reflections on historical practice and her comparative approach of women on ancient religion were formative to my studies, as well. She is also a respected scholar that has studied women of Mediterranean religions broadly. Kraemer observed that early Christian studies depended almost exclusively on textual sources and the emergence of new ones are rare.<sup>14</sup> Hence, it is essential to propose new approaches, especially broadly relating to gender and religion. To that, Clark added that "scholars of late ancient Christianity work, for the most part, on 'high' literary and philosophical texts that lend themselves well to theoretical analysis, not with native informants, nor with masses of data amenable to statistical analysis."<sup>15</sup> In that sense, instead of pursuing an indefinite search for an author's intention, she encouraged researchers to look for the implicit assumptions of texts to see what they reveal about an author's broader culture.

With that in mind, I intend to analyze the texts searching for what they reveal about the exercise of prophecy and how this practice was perceived in Late Mediterranean societies. To be able to do so, in Chapter 3 I present a brief overview of female gender roles and women's access to speech (including formal education) in the Roman Empire.

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<sup>12</sup> King, *The Gospel of Mary of Magdala*, 93–118.

<sup>13</sup> Clark, "The Lady Vanishes," 5–14.

<sup>14</sup> Kraemer, "Woman and Gender," 480.

<sup>15</sup> Clark, "From Patristics to Early Christian Studies," 18.

Then, in Chapter 4 I analyze which of the phenomena women go through to constitute prophecy in the first place. It is fundamental that it is a communication process in which God and an audience are endpoints and the prophet is a transmitter, according to a methodology proposed by Weippert and Nissinen.<sup>16</sup> Once I established that there were women prophets in early Christian literature, I noted how prophecy promoted transgression or the reinforcement of gender roles in the public and private sectors regarding public speech, teaching, and sexuality. I also noted how women's performances were received as a result of divine or human agency.

As stated before, my initial intent was to treat prophecy in a broad sense. Nevertheless, as my research advanced, I felt the need to be more specific in the specific analysis of prophetic speech because orality proved to be a great part of prophecy in general and of women's practices specifically. In Chapter 5, I observe the rhetoric of prophetic speech. Namely, its common patterns and manners of expression and links to Aristotelian rhetoric. Averil Cameron's work was fundamental in this step, both for the quality of her work and for her specific observance of the use of rhetoric as a Christian tool to penetrate the Roman Empire.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, she dedicated a specific chapter to the rhetoric of the apocryphal Acts.

Overall, the rhetoric of popular early Christian literature does not receive as much attention as the rhetoric of the New Testament.<sup>18</sup> However, its observance in my corpus showed that Biblical parallelisms, dialogues, biographies, the use of figurative language, and text formatting according to classical parameters were all discursive strategies that played an important role among theological disputes and, more broadly, in the insertion of Christian ideas in a pagan environment. A particularly interesting finding was made

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<sup>16</sup> Nissinen, "What Is Prophecy? An Ancient Near Eastern Perspective."

<sup>17</sup> Cameron, *Christianity and the Rhetoric of Empire*.

<sup>18</sup> Wilder, *Early Christian Rhetoric*; Kennedy, *New Testament Interpretation through Rhetorical Criticism*.

concerning the *Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas*. The sections attributed to her and her editor have notably different rhetorical styles, which reinforces the argument that stands for her authorship followed by later editing.



## 1. Defining prophecy

The modern study of prophecy is marked by terminology concerns. Should it be used only to describe experiences within religious frames that adopt it as part of their own traditions, namely Christianity, Judaism, and Islam? Or should we endeavor an interdisciplinary approach that is closer to how it was perceived in Antiquity, as a religious, philosophical, medical, and political subject?<sup>19</sup>

As Martti Nissinen observes, the study of this phenomenon has been predominantly Bible-centered, which “has the obvious disadvantage of using one specific tradition (usually one's own) as a yardstick which represents the genuine and proper form of prophecy, and making the comparative material appear as an under – or overdeveloped distortion of the chosen paragon.”<sup>20</sup> In an attempt to overcome this issue, he coined a definition that is sufficiently vast to be adopted by scholars working with cross-cultural comparative methods – therefore useful for Late Antique Mediterranean Religions – but specific enough to overcome the religious connotations of the word. Nissinen builds upon a definition of the Ancient Near Eastern scholar, Manfred Weippert. In Weippert's definition, prophecy is a communication process that involves a *divine sender* of a *message* that is received and transmitted by a human – the *prophet* – to an *audience*.<sup>21</sup> In a four-step process, it would require:

1. the divine sender of the message;
2. the message (the 'revelation');

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<sup>19</sup> Lange, “Greek Seers and Israelite-Jewish Prophets”; Nasrallah, *An Ecstasy of Folly*, 7–11; Nissinen, “What Is Prophecy? An Ancient Near Eastern Perspective.” provides quick overviews of terminology issues and its consequences on contemporary scholarship.

<sup>20</sup> Nissinen, “What Is Prophecy? An Ancient Near Eastern Perspective,” 17.

<sup>21</sup> Manfred Weippert, “Prophetie im Alten Orient”, *Neues Bibel-Lexikon* 3: 1997, 196-200. Translated and quoted in Nissinen, 21.

3. the transmitter of the message (the prophet); and
4. the recipient of the message.

Moreover, prophecy could be distinguished into two groups. The first includes deductive divination, a type that requires material means. The second considers intuitive – or inspired – divination and relies only on cognitive perceptions, such as visions, dreams, auditions, and ecstasy. This differentiation does not mean that intuitive prophets have no technical skills, but that the purpose of these skills is to lead prophets to an altered state of consciousness. In Weippert words:

“Religious revelatory speech can be described as prophecy, if (a) in a cognitive experience (vision, audition, audiovisual experience, dream, etc.), a person encounters the revelation of one or more deities and if (b) this person perceives herself/himself as being ordered to transmit what was revealed in either verbal (prophecy, prophetic word) or non-verbal communication (symbolic act).”<sup>22</sup>

In addition to this definition, Nissinen argues that prophetic experiences subject the prophet to a *specific social role* and function – giving him/her “a condition of ‘otherness’ that is incompatible with the way of life of an average citizen.”<sup>23</sup> Secondly, he observes that ancient prophecy has an evident *predictive characteristic* that helps humans deal with future choices rather than interpreting past events.<sup>24</sup>

In the Late Ancient world where early Christian communities flourished, “the significance of prophetic experience was recognized by all social classes and all nations, and grounded the ancient mythic history of a nation or people, or ensured the continued health of the individual and the community.”<sup>25</sup> According to Laura S. Nasrallah, ancient students of medicine, philosophy, theology, history, astrology, and dream interpretation were all attracted to prophecy as a topic that held not only personal but collective interests,

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<sup>22</sup> Weippert, “Prophetie im Alten Orient”, 197. Translated and quoted in Lange, “Greek Seers and Israelite-Jewish Prophets,” 464.

<sup>23</sup> Nissinen, “What Is Prophecy? An Ancient Near Eastern Perspective,” 22.

<sup>24</sup> Nissinen, 19.

<sup>25</sup> Nasrallah, *An Ecstasy of Folly*, 9.

and was vastly discussed from medical treatises to sociopolitical analysis.<sup>26</sup> Naturally, this phenomenon was familiar to early Christians rooted in Jewish tradition and inserted in a Greco-Roman cultural environment.

In the biblical tradition prophecy is connected to the notion of an alleged divine-human communication, in which the prophet acts as the mouthpiece of God. The Bible authority itself is founded on the concept of prophecy, as a book of messages received directly from God by prophets from Moses on. The fact that these messages were commonly written shows the Hebrew culture emphasis in the transmission phase of the process. It also sets a differentiation between verbal and written messages. The latter is the only ancient prophecy we can still access.

Some of the Hebrew Bible prophets are female, although they are considerably fewer in number than their male counterparts. In a compilation, Nissinen counts only about five women prophets, among fifty or so male prophets, mentioned in the Old Testament.<sup>27</sup> That might indicate that women prophets were historical exceptions or that the editing process of biblical texts may have intentionally left them out.

In the Old Testament, several prophets used God's messages to direct the political and military choices of the Hebrew people. Some acted in a trance, induced by music or dance. Additionally, there are books with a strong eschatological component that reflect the political and religious disruptions of the seventh and sixth centuries B.C.E (such as the destruction of Jerusalem, the Babylonian exile, and the rebuilding of the temple). More importantly, these books reveal a shift in the use of Jewish prophecy during the Second Temple Period. As they were heavily edited, prophecy "was virtually

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<sup>26</sup> Nasrallah, 9.

<sup>27</sup> Nissinen, "Gender and Prophetic Agency in the Ancient Near East and in Greece," 30. In this study he compiled prophetic experiences by gender using 142 texts in Ancient Greek and Near Eastern corpus listed in the sourcebook *Prophets and Prophecy in the Ancient Near East* (SBLWAW 12; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003)

transformed into exegesis and gradually developed into a theological concept.”<sup>28</sup> This editing process included prophecy as part of the revelation (that includes the Torah and the wisdom traditions) and reclaimed a closing point in time in the revelation granted by God to men. As these are theological and literary constructs that do not necessarily reflect historical data, it is hard to determine for sure what happened to prophecy. According to Nissinen, it is safer to affirm that Jewish prophecy continued throughout and after the Second Temple Period, although in decline. In his words, “the bloom of literary prophecy eclipses the concrete manifestations of Prophecy.”<sup>29</sup> Biblical prophets started being seen “not only as accurate predictors of the future, but as advocates of high moral and theological values.”<sup>30</sup>

In the Greco-Roman Ancient context, prophecy was also common. According to Anselm C. Hagedorn and Armin Lange, in Ancient Greece prophecy was a gift that could be granted to virtually anyone and a prophet/seer recognition came from the success of the prediction. The function of the prophet/seer could overlap with the priest’s, such as with the administration of a cult, but that would not necessarily happen. Deductive prophecy – such as divination, oneiromancy, augury, and extispacy – was more common than the completely intuitive one.<sup>31</sup>

Regarding the prophet’s gender, Nissinen observes a pattern in which prophets/seers with technical training were mainly male – practicing divination on the liver of sacrificial animals or on the flight of birds, for example. Those who received revelations by non-technical means, such as an altered state of consciousness, including dreams and frenzy, were almost exclusively female.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Nissinen, 30.

<sup>29</sup> Nissinen, “What Is Prophecy? An Ancient Near Eastern Perspective,” 30.

<sup>30</sup> Wilson, “Current Issues in the Study of New Testament Prophecy,” 38.

<sup>31</sup> Hagedorn, “The Role of the Female Seer/Prophet in Ancient Greece”; Lange, “Greek Seers and Israelite-Jewish Prophets,” 462.

<sup>32</sup> Nissinen, “Gender and Prophetic Agency in the Ancient Near East and in Greece,” 31–32.

Craig Keener notes that women were less educated than men, especially in public activities such as public speech, in both Greco-Roman and Hebrew environments. Even those who were privileged enough to receive formal and advanced education, like the aristocratic, had less technical training.<sup>33</sup> That might be correlated to the fact that women prophets were less technical or were chosen for less technical activities.

In addition to having a more intuitive action, female prophets were frequently received with criticism. In a fragmentary play, for instance, Euripides mocks a woman who had a dream about how the Greek religious life should be conducted. In the second century C.E, Aelius Aristides accuses Pythia, the famous prophetess and priestess of Apollo in Delphi, of not being able to remember what she has prophesied in ecstasy.<sup>34</sup> To Hagedorn, such literary representations show that female prophets/seers were treated with a suspicious attitude by their male counterparts. He observes, however, that the criticism is directed “against official prophetic activity and not against accidental, or better, nonregulated female prophecies, which – in general – seem to be regarded as more authentic as they cannot be influenced”.<sup>35</sup> In addition to that, women prophets were often accused of being possessed by misleading spirits based on a theory that their sexual cavity made them more susceptible to the penetration of spirits.

In an early Christian context, historians traditionally place prophecy within a narrative of rich charismatic origins that goes through a period of contestation and ends (at least in the West) with the banishment of the divine gifts, as an authoritative articulated ecclesiastical order supplants the charismatic organization.

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<sup>33</sup> Keener, “Women’s Education and Public Speech in Antiquity,” 749–56.

<sup>34</sup> Euripides, *Melanippe Desmotis* fr. 494. Nauck, ET: Dillon, *Girls and Women*, 1. Aristides, In Defence of Oratory 34–35: ET: Charles Allison Behr, *Panathenaic Oration and In Defence of Oratory* (vol. 1 of *Aristides in Four Volumes* LCL; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1973), 301. Respectively quoted in Hagedorn, “The Role of the Female Seer/Prophet in Ancient Greece,” 105–6.

<sup>35</sup> Hagedorn, 106.

Weber defines the charismatic authority as a form of power based on the exceptional character or heroism of a person. To him, the prophet would be a charismatic leader that rebels against the established order. Prophecy and institution are opposed, at least at first.<sup>36</sup> As the prophetic movement has to deal with continuity and gradually becomes part of everyday life, it also becomes part of the tradition and loses its charismatic trait.<sup>37</sup> The organization of the Great Church is often described in terms of the routinization of Jesus' charismatic movement.<sup>38</sup>

The study of the *Acts of the Apostles* – that describe many prophetic or gifted experiences, such as the apostles prophesizing in unknown languages – and of Paul's 1<sup>st</sup> letter to Corinthians – in which he discusses a prophecy crisis – mark the first phase of early Christian historiography.<sup>39</sup> Both show us that early Christian prophetic experiences were popular, included glossolalia and were performed by male and female alike, although restrictions to women's authority already appear in pseudo-Pauline letters.<sup>40</sup> The *Didaché* also tells us that prophets were not necessarily elected ministers, but could be wandering travelers visiting communities.<sup>41</sup> They relied on charisma as a source of authority. The reliability of their predictive message, so important in Hebrew and Ancient Greek cults, is not the focus of the *Didaché* warnings.

Jan N. Bremmer states that no explicit testimonies assure wandering prophecy had occurred outside Palestine and Phoenicia in the first century. He affirms it is reasonable that wandering prophets remained mainly in major cities in the first decades after Paul,

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<sup>36</sup> Weber, *Economy and Society*, 237–44.

<sup>37</sup> Weber, 246–48.

<sup>38</sup> Nasrallah, *An Ecstasy of Folly*, 14.

<sup>39</sup> Acts 2 and I Corinthians 1.7

<sup>40</sup> On the contrasting attitudes inside the Pauline Corpus, see MacDonald, *Early Christian Women and Pagan Opinion*.

<sup>41</sup> Lamelas, "Didaché: Doutrina Dos Apóstolos," XVI to XVIII, 232–36.

although they had started penetrating smaller towns of Asia Minor. Therefore, they remained confined to the area accustomed to Jewish prophecy.<sup>42</sup>

Still, according to Bremmer, Christian prophecy first reached numerous small villages in Phrygia and, from there, spread all over the Roman Empire. The discussion of this second phase of prophecies is mostly focused on Montanism (New Prophecy to its adherents), a prophetic movement that started in Asia Minor by the late second century, reached Rome and the North of Africa and stimulated prophetic experiences among men and women. Their main leaders were Montanus and two women, Prisca and Maximilla.

Women's participation seems to have played a pivotal role in the debates concerning prophecy. In the fourth century text, *The Debate between a Montanist and an Orthodox*, the orthodox writer explains that they "do not repudiate prophecies of women" but "do not permit them to speak in churches nor to have authority over men."<sup>43</sup>

Although a broad decline is pointed in many ancient sources, Nasrallah calls attention to how this model of prophecy decline tends to forget that these sources were placed within rhetorically constructed debates and do not necessarily indicate that prophecy declined or became marginal. A model that highlights the struggles and negotiation of authority and identity and the limits of knowledge is more suitable to frame a picture of complex and varied early Christianities.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Bremmer, "The Domestication of Early Christian Prophecy," 91..

<sup>43</sup> (cf. I Tim 2:12) Translation by Ronald Heine, *Montanists Oracles and Testimonia* (Macon: Ga.:Mercer University Press, 1989), 124-26. Cited by Kraemer, *Women's Religions in the Greco-Roman World*, 93.

<sup>44</sup> Nasrallah, *An Ecstasy of Folly*, 13–19.

## 2. The writing of the popular literature of early Christianity

The apocryphal acts, gospels and martyrdom accounts constitute a literary corpus grouped by Richard A. Norris Jr. as the popular literature of early Christianity.<sup>45</sup> Most of these texts were never actual candidates for official or canonical status, but they were undoubtedly popular among their audience, combining teaching and entertainment, and had considerable influence on early Christian practice and belief.

This classification is preferred in this work to the term apocryphal. Although recent scholarship has seen the apocrypha as a wide-ranging group whose writings may not fit into New Testament genres,<sup>46</sup> the term has been traditionally linked to an attempt to imitate the biblical literature in order to reclaim sacred authority with the purpose to substitute or complete the biblical canon.<sup>47</sup>

At first, the term “apocrypha” was used by Gnostics to describe writings that circulated only among initiated. In this context, it becomes a synonym for secret or hidden knowledge. In general, texts written until the third century did not rival with canonical texts in the moment of their genesis. But soon enough the term became a synonym for doubtful, false or spurious teaching in proto-orthodox circles. Their secretive characteristic was criticized by proto-orthodox authors such as Origen, Irenaeus, and Eusebius as contrary to a public profession of faith, and therefore, classified as heretical.<sup>48</sup>

Inventory works of ancient Christian libraries show that already from the second century on there were implied judgments about the status of such writings contrasting

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<sup>45</sup> Norris, “Apocryphal Writings and Acts of the Martyrs.”

<sup>46</sup> Elliott, *The Apocryphal New Testament*, 2007, 93.

<sup>47</sup> Moraldi, *Evangelhos Apócrifos*. introduction to apocrypha present it as linked to attempts of a falsification of orthodoxy. Aune, *The Blackwell Companion to the New Testament*, 625-675 on the other hand, summarizes this traditional designation and presents newer approaches to the designation of these writings.

<sup>48</sup> Moraldi, 11–38.



them to canonical texts. Small lists of non-canonical writings appear in the beginning of the third century; by the sixth century, the so-called *Decretum Gelasianum* presents a long list of apocryphal writings classified according to the genres of the New Testament, which demonstrates they were taken as deviations from the canon.<sup>49</sup> The orthodox battle against the apocrypha has its own particularities and varies according to their teachings or literary genres. There was much more tolerance to the apocryphal acts than to the gospels, for instance.<sup>50</sup>

The orthodox view of the apocrypha impacted future studies from the Patristics to the eighteen century. The emergence of printed books, and the publication of volumes of New Testament Apocrypha, reinforced the impression of the existence of a fixed corpus of apocrypha contrasting to canonical texts.<sup>51</sup> It was only by the nineteenth century that biblical scholars started doubting the objectivity of ancient orthodox writers and their lists.<sup>52</sup> Later discoveries from the nineteenth and twentieth century, such as the Oxyrhynchus papyri and the Nag Hammadi codices also brought light to a greater variety within non-canonical writings.

Most of the apocryphal texts – like the ones studied in this thesis – were written before the establishment of the canon and of the Nicene Creed. At the same time as they may share themes and characters with canonical texts,<sup>53</sup> they also portray very distinct theological developments. That is seen by most recent scholarship as a consequence of the fact that they were written in relatively isolated Christian communities that at first independently developed different perspectives of Christian belief and practice.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Heldt, "New Testament Apocrypha," 652.

<sup>50</sup> Vielhauer, *Historia de la literatura cristiana primitiva*, 727.

<sup>51</sup> Heldt, "New Testament Apocrypha," 653–54.

<sup>52</sup> Ehrman, *Lost Christianities*, 5.

<sup>53</sup> Which is the case of the *Gospel of Mary of Magdala* and of *The Acts of Paul*.

<sup>54</sup> King, *The Gospel of Mary of Magdala*, 6.

In this thesis, I will follow more recent proposals that approach the apocryphal acts and gospels as representative of minoritarian groups and as witnesses to cultural, political, and social factors of their period. The martyrdom literature that was appropriated by orthodoxy also fits the purpose to witness the cultural and political life of early Christians. The resonance and overlapping of these two types of literature – the apocrypha, including acts, gospels, apocalypses, and others, and the martyrs' accounts – have recently been observed by scholars that emphasize their potential to offer historical information even if in fictional reports.<sup>55</sup>

Regarding their overall content, the apocryphal gospels describe some aspect of the story of Jesus and served sectarian and minoritarian communities. Several of them are attributed to apostles, therefore claiming apostolic authority for their content. They were immensely popular until the fourth century and display stories of Jesus' life and teachings. Overall, there are those with stories about Jesus' public life (such as the *Gospel of Peter* and the *Gospel of Thomas*), about nativity and infancy (*Protoevangelism of James*) or about Jesus' death and resurrection (*Gospel of Nicodemus*). There are also texts more focused on Jesus' teachings than on his biography. Those are mostly gnostic such as the *Gospel of Mary of Magdala*.<sup>56</sup>

The apocryphal acts narrate journeys of single apostles and are filled with miraculous episodes, defense of ascetism and descriptions of martyrdoms that draw from legendary material that originated in early oral tradition. Historians know of the existence of at least twenty-four apocryphal books of acts quoted in more than 113 documents.<sup>57</sup>

Because of a clear purpose to entertain while teaching, the apocryphal acts have been compared to literary fiction genres from the Roman world, such as the Hellenistic

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<sup>55</sup> Norris, "Apocryphal Writings and Acts of the Martyrs."

<sup>56</sup> Heldt, "New Testament Apocrypha," 655–62.

<sup>57</sup> Heldt, 662.

novel, particularly the romantic fiction. Despite that, they do not precisely match any of those genres.<sup>58</sup> Women stories in the apocryphal acts vary on a general script: women meet the apostle, convert, and decide to follow his ascetic message, which leads them both to be persecuted. They also portray an unfavorable view of marriage and advocate for sexual continence.<sup>59</sup>

While it is not clear to what extent the apocryphal acts portray historical narratives, it has been defended by scholars such as Virginia Burrus, Stephen Davis and Dennis MacDonald that they were originated in women's orality to an intended female audience, reflecting either historical women's experiences or expectations.<sup>60</sup> Therefore, they belong "to the realm of intended truth."<sup>61</sup> The affirmations of these scholars have been discussed considering that men might have had an important role at least in the literary fixation and editing of the stories.<sup>62</sup>

In their turn, martyrdom stories are part of several literary corpora, including the apocryphal acts and the martyrdom acts. The latter are taken as historical accounts of martyrs' trials, sufferings and violent deaths at the hands of Roman authorities. The earliest known martyrdom account is the *Martyrdom of Polycarp* (150-160). *The Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas*, also called *The Passion of Perpetua and Felicitas*, is one of the earliest available accounts and it is considered the oldest text known written by a Christian woman.

Martyrdom reports do not form a homogeneous genre in the form of their writing but rather in their content. As Candida Moss explains, they registered cultural memories and group identities and served for public liturgy, preparation for martyrdom, voyeuristic

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<sup>58</sup> Burrus, *Chastity as Autonomy*, 7–30.

<sup>59</sup> Burrus, 34.

<sup>60</sup> Burrus, *Chastity as Autonomy*; Davis, *The Cult of Saint Thecla.*; MacDonald, *The Legend and the Apostle*.

<sup>61</sup> Cameron, *Christianity and the Rhetoric of Empire*, 118.

<sup>62</sup> Kraemer, "Thecla of Iconium: Revisited."

spectacle, apologetic discourse and so on.<sup>63</sup> She also observes that the fact that they narrate historical facts does not indicate they do not combine a certain degree of imagination or even fiction. Moreover, these accounts are generally presented as autobiographies of martyrs, whose examples were later as role models and which might have had a later influence on the writing of the *Lives* of the saints. Divine communication through dreams commonly appears in these reports, especially in moments of conversion and deepening of religious commitment.<sup>64</sup>

The four texts that will be analyzed in this work span the approximated period of 150-250 C.E. It is difficult to precisely define their audience, milieu, and intention because their geographic origins are still somewhat obscure. Additionally, information on the social composition and educational level of the average Roman provincial town is still lacking. However, as Averil Cameron firmly affirms, the “popularity and influence” of these narrative “was so enormous and so widespread at all levels that they must rank high among the contributors to the early Christian world view.”<sup>65</sup>

## **2.1. *Gospel of Mary of Magdala***

The *Gospel of Mary of Magdala* is an early second-century text partially available through three groups of fragments. The largest is a fifth-century Coptic manuscript discovered in 1896 at Oxyrhynchus, Upper Egypt. The other two are shorter fragments in Greek dated to the early third century.

Since Coptic script was used almost exclusively by Christians in Egypt, it is assumed that Egyptian Christians were the ones who translated it from Greek and preserved it. There is not much information available about the *Gospel of Mary of*

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<sup>63</sup> Moss, *Ancient Christian Martyrdom*, 1–22.

<sup>64</sup> Ferguson, McHugh, and Norris, *Encyclopedia of Early Christianity*, 281.

<sup>65</sup> Cameron, *Christianity and the Rhetoric of Empire*, 90.

*Magdala* circulation and diffusion. As far as known, it was no longer copied after the fifth century. However, it is clear that it conveys gnostic teachings.<sup>66</sup> In this study I will work with Karen King's translation of all three extracts to English.<sup>67</sup>

In short, the *Gospel of Mary of Magdala* starts with an instruction from the resurrected Jesus to the disciples about the nature of matter and sin. He encourages them to spread the word of God and leaves. After his departure, the disciples hesitate in following his instructions because they fear end up being persecuted as Jesus was. Mary Magdalene is the only one who shows commitment to Jesus' orders, and they start debating what to do next. Peter asks her to tell the group Jesus' teachings that only she knows. She accepts the invitation and reports a conversation she had with Jesus in a vision — the Savior had taught her about the nature of spiritual visions and the ascent of the soul. There are three pages missing from this part of the story, but it is possible to note the Lord defends the prevalence of spiritual character over matter. The description Mary's vision takes most part of the text.

After sharing the vision with others, Mary becomes silent, and Peter and Andrew question the integrity of her teachings. Their main argument is that Jesus would not have revealed such advanced knowledge to a woman. As the apostle Levi comes out in her defense, the available fragment ends abruptly, leaving the rest of the discussion unknown. That small final extract, however, is enough to present "the most straightforward and convincing argument in any early Cristian writing for the legitimacy of women's authority," according to Karen King.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> King, *The Gospel of Mary of Magdala*, 3–12.

<sup>67</sup> I have worked with the translation by King, *The Gospel of Mary of Magdala.*, pp.13-18.

<sup>68</sup> King, 3.

## 2.2. *Acts of Paul and Thecla*

The second-century *Acts of Paul and Thecla* narrates Paul's conversion of an elite virgin named Thecla. It is now incorporated within a larger collection of Paul's missions, letters, and martyrdom, composing the *Acts of Paul*, but it once circulated independently.<sup>69</sup> Tertullian already mentions Thecla's story on 190 C.E. as a popular tale that inspired many women to assume leadership roles – which he disapproved.<sup>70</sup>

Tertullian disapproved the influence the text had on women ideas about religious leadership and attributed its authorship to a presbyter in Asia, who would have admitted the forgery of Paul's writings.<sup>71</sup> While some scholars accept his claim,<sup>72</sup> some argue for a female oral background in the story, that would have been told among women before its literary fixation.<sup>73</sup>

There are over forty primitive manuscripts of the *Acts of Paul and Thecla* only in Greek. Latin, Syriac, Armenian and Slavonic versions also survive. The popularity of the texts may be explained by the veneration of Saint Thecla in both East and West. By the fourth and fifth centuries, the devotion was widespread in the Mediterranean world, from Gaul to Palestine, but with particularly strong evidence in Asia Minor.<sup>74</sup>

In the story, Thecla is a virgin who is soon to be married. She hears Paul preach for days in a row and converts. Decided to be chaste, she is confronted by her family and groom but remains firm. They denounce Thecla and Paul to the authorities. He is expelled from the city, and she is condemned to be burned. Thecla survives and searches for Paul's

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<sup>69</sup> Information about the context of production is in Elliott, *The Apocryphal New Testament*, 2007, 350–53; Heldt, "New Testament Apocrypha," 664–65.

<sup>70</sup> *On Baptism* 17. Consulted in Kraemer, *Women's Religions in the Greco-Roman World*, 260.

<sup>71</sup> Tertullian, *On Baptism* 17.

<sup>72</sup> As Ehrman, *Lost Christianities*, 36–39.

<sup>73</sup> Namely Burrus, *Chastity as Autonomy*; Davis, *The Cult of Saint Thecla*; MacDonald, *The Legend and the Apostle*.

<sup>74</sup> Davis, *The Cult of Saint Thecla*, v–vi.

help, but he refuses her company in missionary journeys because he believes she may fall into carnal temptation.

When Paul is asked by a stranger if he is responsible for Thecla, he lies about not knowing her. It is Queen Tryphaena who welcomes her in her home as a foster parent. But Thecla is arrested again and taken for public execution. However, she miraculously survives every scheme planned to kill her: wild beasts become docile in her presence; a lioness fights other animals that attack her. Finally decides to baptize herself in a pool full of seals. Authorities and the population watch it quite impressed, and she is freed. She then reunites with Paul, who encourages her to “go and teach the word of God.”<sup>75</sup>

Distinct manuscripts have different endings for her story, as later versions includes new events about the end of her life.<sup>76</sup> They end with her retirement in Seleucia or with her disappearance when entering a rock in a desert cave, for instance. I worked with the translations by Elliot, James, and Lamelas.<sup>77</sup>

The *Acts of Paul and Thecla* have been studied extensively by those interested in ascetism, autonomy, authority, and women’s ministerial ordination. Her teachings and baptisms have made her an exemplary case study from pioneer investigations on women and gender in early Christianity initiated in the late nineteenth century to recent works focused on gender construction and power relations. Thecla’s miraculous experiences, however, have not been the focus of attention of these studies.<sup>78</sup>

Most of them happen while she is in the martyrdom arena and is freed from death by beasts that refuse to attack her or by flames that do not burn her.<sup>79</sup> Outside the arena, three other wondrous experiences occur directly to women in the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*.

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<sup>75</sup> The Acts of Paul, para. 41.

<sup>76</sup> Ehrman, *Lost Christianities*, 36.

<sup>77</sup> Elliott, “The Apocryphal New Testament,” 2007; James, “The Acts of Thomas”; Lamelas, *São Paulo ; Actos de Paulo e Tecla ; Carta Aos Laodicenses*.

<sup>78</sup> Kraemer, “Women and Gender.”

<sup>79</sup> Acts of Paul and Thecla, para. 21-37

In the first, Thecla sees “the Lord in the likeness of Paul.”<sup>80</sup> In the second, Tryphaena dreams of her dead daughter, who asks her to receive Thecla so she can pray for her afterlife – a plot somehow similar to Perpetua’s conversation with her dead brother.<sup>81</sup> In the third, Myrte transmits a message to her fellows as the Spirit “comes upon her.”<sup>82</sup>

### 2.3. *Acts of Thomas*

The *Acts of Thomas* is an early third-century pseudepigraphy attributed to Judas Thomas, presented as Jesus’ twin brother. Because of its tendencies to encratism and Manichaeism, scholars have assigned its origin to East Syria. It is one of the major apocryphal acts and the only one that have survived in its entirety. It is accessible in Syriac manuscripts from the seventh and six centuries; and in a Greek version.<sup>83</sup> I have worked with the translations by Elliot and James<sup>84</sup>

The text narrates the apostle Thomas’ mission to India, filled with miracles, ascetic conversions, prayers, and hymns. Much of the study of the book concentrates on its allegorical prayers and hymns, such as the Hymn of the Pearl, and its relations to Gnosticism.<sup>85</sup>

Throughout the text, there are at least ten episodes of visions, dreams, and auditions.<sup>86</sup> Most of them take place in the presence of the apostle and are shared by two or more people. They are often as simple and succinct as a voice approvingly saying “amen” from heaven.<sup>87</sup> At least four of these episodes have participation of female

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<sup>80</sup> Acts of Paul and Thecla, para. 21

<sup>81</sup> Acts of Paul and Thecla, para.28

<sup>82</sup> James, “The Acts of Paul,” para. IX. of a fragment “scenes of a farewell”

<sup>83</sup> Heldt, “New Testament Apocrypha,” 666.

<sup>84</sup> James, “The Acts of Thomas”; Elliott, “The Apocryphal New Testament,” 2007.

<sup>85</sup> Norris, “Apocryphal Writings and Acts of the Martyrs,” 161–71.

<sup>86</sup> *Acts of Thomas*, paragraphs 11-12, 24, 27 (with two distinct episodes), 44-46, 91-92, 121, 145, 154-155, 158.

<sup>87</sup> *Acts of Thomas*, para. 121.



characters: the visit Christ pays to a bride and her groom;<sup>88</sup> the manifestation of a demon that “no one except a woman and the apostle could see”;<sup>89</sup> the dream interpretation performed by Mygdonia, one of Thomas’ converted ascetics;<sup>90</sup> and the vision of a young man that made Mnesara wake up from sleep and find her husband who was escaping prison.<sup>91</sup>

#### **2.4. *Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas***

This text is a personal account of Perpetua’s and four members of her household’s martyrdom in Carthage, North Africa, during the reign of Septimus Severus (c.a. 202-204 C.E). The text is known from an early Latin version, a later Greek version and a short version called *Acta Minora*. It has a preface and a conclusion, attributed to an editor – believed to be Tertullian – and a diary of prison life with detailed descriptions of dreams attributed to Perpetua and Saturus. Her authorship has been studied, and it is mostly accepted. If true, this is the first historical writing of an early Christian woman.<sup>92</sup>

According to Patricia Cox Miller’s summary, the commentaries on Perpetua’s dreams (that constitute most parts of her prophetic experiences) from Antiquity to the present day have focused mainly on her roles as a catechumen and a martyr, placing the discussion in a theological context.<sup>93</sup> More recently, feminist historiography has focused on her role as a woman and on gender issues such as performativity. These commentaries have also privileged the analysis of the symbols and overall content of the dreams. I worked with the translation by Roberts and Donaldson.<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> *Acts of Thomas*, para. 11.

<sup>89</sup> *Acts of Thomas*, para. 44.

<sup>90</sup> *Acts of Thomas*, para. 91.

<sup>91</sup> *Acts of Thomas*, para. 154.

<sup>92</sup> Moss, *Ancient Christian Martyrdom*, 130.

<sup>93</sup> Miller, “Perpetua and Her Diary of Dreams,” 151–64.

<sup>94</sup> Roberts and Donaldson, “The Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas.”

In the report, Perpetua describes the final days of a martyr. She is in prison breast-feeding a baby, accompanied by a pregnant woman, Saturus and two other men. Her family pressures her to pay tribute to the gods of the Empire. Her condemnation will not only kill her but bring shame to her family and leave an orphan child. She refuses and confesses to be a Christian. Before she is taken to the arena, Perpetua has three dreams: one with a vision on heaven after climbing a ladder, a second with a vision of her dead brother and a third with a fight with an Egyptian man when she is stripped and sees herself as a man. They are described in details and she shows great awareness of their predictive and supernatural power. The editor adds the story of her last day at the arena, filled with miraculous interventions in her and the others' favor.

Specifically, throughout the report, Perpetua goes through at least seven experiences of communication with the divine. She hears "the Spirit" during baptism;<sup>95</sup> has visions/dreams;<sup>96</sup> has sensorial experiences "tasting a sweetness" she "cannot describe";<sup>97</sup> and avoids physical pain by being "in the Spirit and in ecstasy."<sup>98</sup> Felicitas also describes her future martyrdom in terms of possession: "Now it is I that suffer what I suffer, but then there will be another in me."<sup>99</sup> Besides that, Saturus has a vision that is recounted by Perpetua.<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> Roberts and Donaldson, para. I.2.

<sup>96</sup> Roberts and Donaldson, I.3, II.3, II.4, III.2. In the English translation, both names are used to describe the same experiences, and therefore a differentiation is not clear. According to Miller, in the original Latin, she first asks to see "a *visio*, a technical onirological term designating a prophetic dream." Later, she refers to these experiences as *ostension*, a term that "denotes a type of figurative revelation that explains divine secrets." In Miller's citation of Amat (Jaqueline, Amat. *Songes et Visions*: Paris: Etudes Augustiniennes, 1985, 68), *ostension* is "a striking scene, close to prodigious, that manifests divine power."

<sup>97</sup> Roberts and Donaldson, I.3.

<sup>98</sup> Roberts and Donaldson, VI.3.

<sup>99</sup> Roberts and Donaldson, 1885, p. V.2.

<sup>100</sup> Roberts and Donaldson, 1885 p. IV.1.

### 3. Women, public speech and autonomy

In the ancient Mediterranean world of the Roman Empire, the ideal woman was pious, chaste and home-loving. In the domestic sphere, she was expected to fulfill the role of wife and mother and had a relative authority over children, slaves, and daily activities.<sup>101</sup> Differently, in the public sphere, her participation was restricted, commonly constrained to religious activities, with few exceptions of upper-class women who indirectly influenced political life. Women did not participate in political offices nor spoke in assemblies.<sup>102</sup> Furthermore, they needed male representation in court.<sup>103</sup> In this scenario, women's public speech was limited: the art of rhetoric, widely taught and practiced in the Empire, was a male dominion.

Despite that, in popular early Christian literature women spoke publicly in arenas, trials, and religious gatherings. Perpetua, for example, defends herself and her companions from authorities abuses and preaches in the arena;<sup>104</sup> Mary of Magdala teaches a group of men.<sup>105</sup> Most of the times, their public appearances happened under the claim of divine inspiration, but not necessarily performing rituals or priestly activities, such as the Greek Pythiai and Sybils. They were mostly speaking to defend themselves, to pass a Christian message and to convert. What were the normative patterns for public speech in their society? How did their speaking conform to or subvert gender roles?

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<sup>101</sup> That model is particularly strong for upper class women. Lower class women had more access to the public sphere acting in sectors of urban craft work, market selling and agriculture, according to Wagner-Hasel, "Brill's New Pauly," 2002, 703; Reden, "Brill's New Pauly," 743.

<sup>102</sup> Wagner-Hasel, "Woman: Political and Social Position of Women." In Brill's New Pauly", 702.

<sup>103</sup> Guerra, "A Mulher Em Roma. Algumas Considerações Em Torno Da Sua Posição Social e Estatuto Jurídico," 105; Wagner-Hasel, "Woman: Political and Social Position of Women".In "Brill's New Pauly," 2002, 702 vol. I5.

<sup>104</sup> Roberts and Donaldson, "The Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas," V.I and V.3.

<sup>105</sup> *The Gospel of Mary of Magdala*, paras. 6-9

### 3.1. Private and silent: the place of women in Antiquity

Scholars interested in the Greco-Roman society commonly adopt the dichotomy public/private to describe the roles of men and women in Antiquity. The private sphere was differentiated from the public sphere by its intimate, private character, not necessarily by the space in which it took place. Indoor activities such as education might have taken place at home, but still held a collective interest and belonged to the public realm, for instance.

Women's world in the Roman Empire was related to the house, the textile production and wedding rites, as men's tasks were related to war, politics, commerce, and sports. In Homer's *Odyssey*, Telemachus directs his mother to textile work, spinning and weaving, reserving the spoken world to men.<sup>106</sup> Other Greek poets and philosophers praised the silence of women or mocked women's public participation, and advocated against their presence as a disturbance.<sup>107</sup>

Work division was supported by a common medical theory that attested that female lower bodily temperatures made women physically weaker and better suited for motherhood and home activities, while the warm male body was able to endure extreme temperatures which enabled them to work outside, travel and battle.<sup>108</sup>

Although that model can be read as an ideal – Greek and Roman women exercised professions in the marketplace, for instance,<sup>109</sup> and certain provinces tolerated their public

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<sup>106</sup> Homer, *Od.* I-356-359, II. II 490-93 and others. Quoted in: Wagner-Hasel, "Gender Roles: Gender Roles in Literature.". In Brill's New Pauly, 741.

<sup>107</sup> Hesiod, *Theogony* 570-612 describes women as a plague inflicted to men as a punishment; Aristophanes play *The assembly of women* mocks the possibility of women acting politically. There were compilations of female negative qualities, such as unfaithfulness and unrestrained eating (Aristophanes, *Ecclesiazusae* 220-238). All quoted in: Wagner-Hasel, 741–42.

<sup>108</sup> Xenophon, *Oeconomicus* 7,20-43. Quoted in: King, "Brill's New Pauly," 745.

<sup>109</sup> Reden, "Work: Greece and Rome". In Brill's New Pauly, 742.

presence more than others<sup>110</sup> – there was a clear normative division. Women were associated with an interior, private, silent world, and men with the public discursive arena.

In the Jewish context women's participation in politics and social life was also restricted; their word was not considered valid in courts, and they could not officially rule. Instead, their place of existence was the household and its associated economic activities, such as producing textiles and turning raw material into foodstuff.<sup>111</sup>

In the Hebrew Bible, the presence of female religious activity and female conceptualizations of the divine decreases as the monotheism consolidates. In the first biblical writings, women are portrayed as connected to foreign gods and marginal practices, such as divination. Feminine symbols and metaphors are used to depict divine traits, such as creation, nourishment, and the Wisdom. When these depictions become less frequent, women still exercise non-institutionalized political offices such as prophetism.<sup>112</sup>

Looking from a social perspective, it is possible to apprehend from Hebrew writings that foreign women who married Jewish men could remain loyal to their own culture and religion rather than adapt to those of their husbands.<sup>113</sup> Also, that women could have an indirect influence on the political arena, which is the case of the queens Esther and Vashti, from the Book of Esther.<sup>114</sup> However, Jewish cultural imagery of women is not much different from the Greco-Roman model of maintaining women as quiet, chaste, and home-loving in the private sphere.

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<sup>110</sup> Herodotus (II, 35) writes about how Egyptian women worked and circulated in public markets more often than it would be acceptable by Greek standards. Quoted in: Lissarrague, "A figuração das mulheres," 241.

<sup>111</sup> References to women in Hebrew context are from Ramos, "A Mulher Na Bíblia"; Eskenazi, "The Lives of Women in the Postexilic Era."

<sup>112</sup> There are at least five women prophets in the Old Testament, as detailed in Chapter. 1, p. 11.

<sup>113</sup> Eskenazi, "The Lives of Women in the Postexilic Era," 23.

<sup>114</sup> Eskenazi, 27.

In popular early Christian literature, women initially fulfill exemplary roles within the pious/home-loving/private constrained model: the ascetic women of the apocryphal acts are soon-to-be married virgins or dedicated wives; Perpetua is a *matrona*;<sup>115</sup> Mary Magdalene becomes a pure and honored follower of Christ. At some point, however, they commit to an ascetic lifestyle or religious teaching – in the form of conversionist teaching and missionary trips. And this decision breaks the model of an ancient Mediterranean world where “there is no place for choice” for women, which is highlighted by the fact that “before Christianity, the documentation of women who remained single is very rare.”<sup>116</sup> When women make choices, they frustrate their families and disturb society at large. By remaining chaste or speaking publicly about religion, life choices and values, they fail to attend to their domestic duties as wives, mothers, and house administrators.

The case of Perpetua, a historical woman and *matrona*, can be understood under the light of these expectations. Perpetua left an early infant to be raised by relatives to proudly fulfill a martyr fate, and heard from her father: “Have pity my daughter, on my gray hair (...) do not deliver me up to the scorn of men”.<sup>117</sup>

At Rome, when the *puella* achieved sexual maturity, she became a *uirgo* and was married immediately after through arrangements made by men – father and future husband. Wives almost always joined their spouse’s family in a patrilocal residence. The Latin term for marriage – *matrimonium* (derived from *mater*) – indicates that the wives’

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<sup>115</sup> Moss, *Ancient Christian Martyrdom*, 130-132 discusses the incongruities in Perpetua’s presentation as a *matrona*. If she is an elite woman, why is she martyred with a non-aristocratic group and not in a privately beheaded? More importantly, why isn’t her child given to her husband’s family, as stated by Roman law for married woman? Regardless of the historicity of her account, I will use her status as a *matrona* to discuss her access to education and rhetoric in this work given that the thesis has other concerns than social stratification.

<sup>116</sup> Roussell, “A política dos corpos: entre procriação e continência em Roma,” 357. My translation.

<sup>117</sup> *The Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas*, II.1

most important task was to provide their husbands with descendants. The function gave them “honor, dignity, even a 'majesty' through which the civic, if not political, brilliance of their function was manifest.”<sup>118</sup> On the other hand, the term *patrimonium* shows that assets were a subject for father/men.

The representation of the Roman woman is not stable throughout eight or nine centuries of history. Between centuries VI B.C.E and III C.E there were changes. In the later texts of the Empire, a *matrona* designation includes a social role that can be played by any respectful woman. By the early third century, Ulpianus refers as such to any woman who leads a moral life, regardless she is married, widowed, free-born or freedwoman.<sup>119</sup> The broadening of the concept may relate to changes in Roman law that guaranteed a progression in women’s patrimonial and matrimonial rights from the second century on, allowing them to make testaments and to leave their possessions to their heirs.”<sup>120</sup>

Despite those progressions in law, the changes introduced by early Christians were extravagant in the context of the Empire. By allowing women to have more mobility and public visibility through teaching and missionary travels (I Tim. 5.13-14), they disturbed long-standing patterns. There were tensions between Christian and pagan authors (and even discrepancies among Christian groups) that have been extensively studied in the Pauline letters, and can also be seen in the apocryphal acts and on Perpetua’s *Passion*.<sup>121</sup> Early Christian women defied their association with the private world and silence of speech and ultimately, unbalanced both public and private spheres.

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<sup>118</sup> Thomas, “A divisão dos sexos no direito romano,” 132–33. My translation.

<sup>119</sup> *Digest* 46. I and 50. I6. Quoted in: Cancik et al., *Brill’s New Pauly*, 454.

<sup>120</sup> Guerra, “A Mulher Em Roma. Algumas Considerações Em Torno Da Sua Posição Social e Estatuto Jurídico,” 112.

<sup>121</sup> See MacDonald, *Early Christian Women and Pagan Opinion*. on the tensions between Christian and pagan authors; for an overview of tensions among different Christian groups the in apocryphal literature, see Cameron, *Christianity and the Rhetoric of Empire*, 89–120.

It is worth noting that, throughout the vastity of the Empire, local differences might have shaped different attitudes towards female prophecy and affected the production of early Christian stories that are fixated on this literature.<sup>122</sup> Nevertheless, classic culture was so notably widespread in the world of Late Antiquity that even the most remote provinces shared an “amazingly uniform culture, taste, and language”<sup>123</sup>. Aristocrats and rulers served as doorkeepers of the classical culture whose influence is especially marked on the artistic and literary production of the period. The classical education provided the “bridgehead between the two worlds”<sup>124</sup> : the Hellenistic heritage and the “barbarian” practices and beliefs.

### **3.2. Rhetoric: a male art of speaking?**

In the Ancient Greco-Roman world, to speak to a public audience was more than a fortuity. It was a necessary task in which men took very much pleasure, transforming it from a spontaneous ability to an exhaustively organized and practiced art of persuasive speaking: rhetoric.

The story of this discipline starts around 485 BCE in Sicily when, after the deposition of tyrants, the population reclaimed in droves lands that had been expropriated from them.<sup>125</sup> In numerous judicious processes, they began to perfection oral communication to convince juries. The situation inspired the creation of oratorial techniques that could be taught in schools to qualify citizens to defend their causes.<sup>126</sup>

Philosophers enhanced the study of oratory, transitioning from a “spontaneous eloquence” to an “erudite” one, as Manuel Alexandre Junior explains.<sup>127</sup> This shift

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<sup>122</sup> As detailed on chapter 2.

<sup>123</sup> Brown, *The World of Late Antiquity*, 14.

<sup>124</sup> Brown, 29.

<sup>125</sup> Alexandre Júnior, Alberto, and Pena, *Retórica*, 13.

<sup>126</sup> Alexandre Júnior, Alberto, and Pena, 14.

<sup>127</sup> Alexandre Júnior, Alberto, and Pena, 12. My translation.



rhetoric became the essence of all Greco-Roman formal education, and the basis of a political system that required public speech in many instances, such as assemblies, councils, and courts. It was also differentiated although that demarcation is not always strict or clear even in classic authors – in literary and argumentative studies. Its goal was to unite “ornament and efficiency, pleasure and utility, content and form.”<sup>128</sup>

Contemporary scholarship tends to divide the study of rhetoric into two branches: the study of elocution, that is, the literary production; and the study of argumentation, that is the persuasive communication. In chapter 5 of this work, I will use Aristotle’s study of argumentative persuasion – his emphasis on proof and critique of emotional appeal – to observe how early Christian women’s inspired speech captivated the audience.

It should be noted here that women’s restricted participation in the public world also affected their access to rhetoric. While its influence in Roman schools was consolidated since the end of the first century CE, advanced studies in rhetoric were reserved to higher educational levels, mostly inaccessible to women.<sup>129</sup> Girls were commonly educated at home, although it was not uncommon for them to attend the *ludus* (primary school) and the *grammaticus* (intermediate studies), where they were versed in grammar and literature. Aspiring to higher education, and therefore to a rhetorical education, implicated for a woman a loss of reputation and social conflict.<sup>130</sup>

There are many mentions in classic authors about upper-class women versed in literary studies – an asset, in their view, useful to entertain guests at social events<sup>131</sup> – but not in the persuasive branch of rhetoric. Though that differentiation is mostly

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<sup>128</sup> Alexandre Júnior, Alberto, and Pena, 15. My translation.

<sup>129</sup> In intermediate level, Greek and Latin grammar and literature, topics of rhetoric, were taught. Advanced themes, systematization and discursive exercises, however, were only given in upper level for young men. Graduation culminated in an open ceremony of public speeches. For details, see Marrou, *História Da Educação Na Antigüidade*, 375–88.

<sup>130</sup> Monroe, *Source Book of the History of Education for the Greek and Roman Period.*, 394.

<sup>131</sup> Pliny (*Letters* 4.19.4 and 5.16.1-3); Juvenal (*Satires* 6.434-56); Sallust (*Catilinarian Conspiracy* 25.2-5). Quoted in: Joyal, McDougall, and Yardley, *Greek and Roman Education*, 187 and 228.

contemporary, it is clear that these mentions refer to women showing knowledge in poetry and running literary venues.

Rhetoric specific teaching and training was reserved for men. Paradoxically, its presence was so spread that virtually any individual had access to its performance and effects. What are the effects of the reduced access women had to rhetoric?

In the first and more obvious level, in a society in which speech could produce immediate policy decisions, denying access to rhetoric was denying access to political participation. Additionally, the importance of rhetoric in Greco-Roman ambience was such that the excellence in speech was more valued than any other public quality, except for the military aptitude. For this society, “to teach how to speak was, at the same time, to teach how to think plentifully and even to live plentifully.”<sup>132</sup> Therefore, the denial of a rhetorical education limited the enjoyment of intellectual life.

Moreover, public speech was a useful skill for those interested in making their way in the social pyramid through words. While that is truthful for upper-class men throughout Antiquity, it applies to most men in Late Antiquity centuries, characterized by social mobility. From the second to the fourth century BCE, the Roman Empire new governing classes craved for new officers, making it possible for scholars, including rhetors, to make their way from lower to upper classes by work or education.<sup>133</sup>

Coming from North Africa as a poor young man, Augustine reached a position as a rhetoric teacher in Milan and then became a bishop and an exponent of Western Christian theology, for example. A similar path was highly unlikely, if not impossible, for a woman.

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<sup>132</sup> Marrou, *História Da Educação Na Antigüidade*, 308. My translation.

<sup>133</sup> Brown, *The World of Late Antiquity*, 22–34.

Nonetheless, if not through a formal education, women in early Christian stories indeed made their way to the public world through words and certainly inspired historical women to do so.<sup>134</sup> Women's prophetic speech reclaimed their authority in charisma, not in education. As Mary Magdalene states: "He [Jesus] has prepared us and made us true Men."<sup>135</sup>

In addition to that, we cannot assume technical training in rhetoric as a condition to produce persuasive speech. Analyzing early Christian speech strategies, Averil Cameron observes that despite common claims of Christian authors, early Christian rhetoric is not remarkably specialized.<sup>136</sup> Either way, building up from rhetoric or divine inspiration, trained skills or inspired speech, women who practiced public speaking defied political standards and gender roles of the Ancient World.

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<sup>134</sup> Tertullian, *On Baptism* 17. The author complains about women using Thecla's example as a license to teach and baptize.

<sup>135</sup> *Gospel of Mary Magdalene* 5.3

<sup>136</sup> Cameron, *Christianity and the Rhetoric of Empire*, 20.

#### 4. Are there women prophets in early Christian popular literature?

Women portrayed in the *Passion of Perpetua and Felicitas*, in the *Acts of Paul*, in the *Acts of Thomas* and in the *Gospel of Mary of Magdala* have visions, dreams, auditions, and sensorial experiences that they relate to the divine or the “Spirit.” Using Nissinen’s and Weippert’s criteria to define prophecy, I will observe which of those phenomena constitute a communication process with the divine.<sup>137</sup> If women experience prophecy, why are they not called prophetesses in the texts or in its later reception? What are the other implications in this label?

Additionally, I observe how female prophecy relates to gender transgressions in the texts and in the Late Antique Mediterranean society at large. Which of the transgressions constitute a condition for prophetic speech in the first place? And which are stimulated or particularly generated in early Christian communities? How does prophecy affect the discussion of true and false speech in New Testament literature?

Finally, how does prophecy shape women’s voices? Does it incentive women’s agency? Or are women simply instruments in divine agency, understood as a real and independent power in Antiquity? Does the practice of prophecy increase women’s autonomy?

##### 4.1. Communication with the divine

In the criteria established by Weippert and Nissinen, prophecy is a four-step communication process (messenger/message/transmitter/audience) with a social function and a prediction of the future.<sup>138</sup> The definition was coined by Nissinen from Weipert

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<sup>137</sup> Nissinen, “What Is Prophecy? An Ancient Near Eastern Perspective,” 19–22.

<sup>138</sup> Nissinen, 19–22.

studies. It constitutes a methodological attempt to identify prophecy despite the variety of its manifestations within different religious traditions and geographical frameworks. It is helpful to work with sources where prophetic phenomena are not explicitly labeled as such.

I find it also beneficial to verify prophecy's social validation, which is ultimately what differentiates it from experiences such as frenzy or *mania*. Those may have a similar appearance, but are often negatively associated with madness, folly, ignorance, and not divinely inspired.<sup>139</sup> Ultimately, the link between divinity and a person is what defines his experience as prophetic and his sayings as inspired speech. This link is not understood in this work in its contemporary sense, as a real, manifested connection. It rather refers to an ancient perception of effective divine power over the human world.

Bellow there is a methodological comparison that searches for validation of women's experiences as prophetic within their context. This comparison also highlights differences among several types of prophetic experiences.

Table 1 summarizes the comparison of Weippert's and Nissinen's criteria to Perpetua's experiences. Saturus' was excluded, since I aim to work with female experiences, and so was Felicitas', since it does not refer to something she has experienced but only hoped to. Perpetua's ladder vision and the sweetness tasting were grouped as parts of a single episode.

The comparison reveals that four of Perpetua's experiences fully fulfill the authors' criteria. That result considers Perpetua's writing as a type of *transmission*, and future *audience* as a valid audience (both "indirect"). If we consider only the "direct" transmission of her messages explicitly to another character in the story, the ladder vision

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<sup>139</sup> Nasrallah, *An Ecstasy of Folly*, 131–96.

– shared with her brother – is the only experience that matches all the criteria. The distinction is not posited by Weippert but was added by me for clarification purpose.

TABLE 1. Weippert's and Nissinen's criteria applied to Perpetua

	Divine sender	Message	Transmitter		Audience		Social Function	Predictive
			Direct	Indirect	Direct	Indirect		
II.2: Hears Spirit during baptism	✓	✓		✓		✓		✓
I.3: Ladder vision (ends with sweet tasting)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
II.3: First vision of her brother	✓	✓		✓		✓	✓	✓
II.4 Second vision of her brother	✓	✓		✓		✓	✓	
III.2 Arena vision	✓	✓		✓		✓	✓	✓
IV.3 Ecstasy during beasts' attack				✓		✓		

I argue for the first assessment for two reasons. The first reason is that prophetic writings played a strong role in Jewish prophecy, and that practice rooted early Christianity beliefs. Secondly, Perpetua demonstrates deep awareness of her role as a transmitter. As reported by her editor, his job was to "obey the command of the most blessed Perpetua" to "add one more testimony".<sup>140</sup> Moreover, Weippert includes written

<sup>140</sup> Roberts and Donaldson, "The Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas," V.3.

communication and even non-verbal communication (symbolic acts) as valid expressions of intuitive prophecy.

Regarding other criteria, all experiences, except the ecstasy, have a clear *sender* – sometimes designated as the “Spirit” or the “Lord,” sometimes not named but highlighted by the use of the passive voice (“this was shown to me”, “I was awakened”).<sup>141</sup> This sender reveals a *message* not previously known which is transmitted to others – brother, fellow martyrs, and readers. It is worth mentioning that Perpetua is selective about which message to convey since her writing is not a comprehensive description of her martyrdom, nor a narration of daily facts in the dungeons or at court. Instead, it is a selection of remarkable experiences, a “diary of dreams.”<sup>142</sup> Perpetua not only writes but also builds her message as a legacy that she knows, as a martyr, will influence many Christians.

Additionally, she performs, in at least three occasions, a *social function* that gives her a condition of “otherness” which differentiates her not only from other citizens (from whom she was already distinguished by her prisoner and probable martyr condition) but also from other martyrs, women and ultimately Christians. She is aware of her unique status (“And I, who knew that I was privileged to converse with the Lord”) and ability to influence situations (“But I trusted that my prayer would bring help to his suffering”).<sup>143</sup> She was, as Peter Brown describes her, the group’s “spokesman and moral leader.”<sup>144</sup>

Finally, the *predictive character* appears clearly in four visions. Her fighting with a cow as in “sleep” appearing to be “in the Spirit and in ecstasy” is the experience with the least in common to Weippert’s and Nissinen’s definitions. Together with the hearing

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<sup>141</sup> “This was shown to me” is written at least on the episodes described in Roberts and Donaldson, I.3, II.3 and II.4; “awakened” in the end of I.3.

<sup>142</sup> Miller, *Dreams in late antiquity*, 148.

<sup>143</sup> Roberts and Donaldson, I. 3 and II.3.

<sup>144</sup> Brown, *The Body and Society*, 73.

of the Spirit during a baptism ceremony, this episode seems to have received the least attention from both the writer and her editor; the descriptions are concise.

At Table 2, I summarize the prophetic episodes in the *Acts of Thomas*. In this and the following analysis, I did not find it useful to distinguish direct from indirect transmission and audience. Unlike Perpetua, women in the apocryphal acts and in the *Gospel of Mary* are not historical individuals responsible for sharing their stories.

TABLE 2. Weippert's and Nissinen's criteria applied to women in the *Acts of Thomas*

	Divine sender	Message	Transmitter	Audience	Social Function	Predictive
11. Princess bride sees Christ	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
91. Mygdonia interprets dream	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
154-155. Mnesara sees a young man	✓	✓				✓
*42-46. Woman and apostle see the demon		✓				✓

In the *Acts of Thomas*, the demon vision has an uncommon structure. First, its sender is the devil. Secondly, he first speaks to the apostle and only after to the woman. Their dialogue not only takes place first, but the demon's message is mainly directed to him. Thomas provokes the demon to manifest while the woman maintains a passive posture. He is the mediator. For those reasons, this episode does not characterize the woman as a prophet.

However, two of the women's episodes match all criteria established by Weippert and Nissinen to identify prophecy. There is a clear *divine sender* of a *message* that is instructive or auspicious, but always *predictive*. When Jesus speaks to the newly married



couple, for instance, he lists the drawbacks of not being ascetic. Sexual intercourse, he says, will bring the couple the burden of bearing children who are troubled and “unprofitable” (“For they become either lunatics or half-withered or crippled....”). The care of souls, on the other hand, will reward them with the birth of “living children.”<sup>145</sup> Very impressed by the teaching, the princess passes it forward to her parents. Her resourcefulness in teaching impresses her *audience* and grants her a *social function* as a prophet that is clearly singular to those who contact her.

In Mygdonia’s case, the message reveals the meaning of her husband’s dream, which she immediately transmits to him. He bases his future actions on her divinatory skills, showing dependence on her (“He said to Mygdonia, ‘What does this mean? For behold the dream and this act!’”<sup>146</sup>). Mygdonia not only has a social function but is empowered by divination. She later becomes Thomas’ assistant in baptism ceremonies, being responsible for ministering women.<sup>147</sup>

Finally, Mnesara is a Christian woman who is awakened by a young man and is led by him in the dark to find her husband. Although she speaks about her experience, the purpose of the visitation or vision is to give her directions, not to pass a message on. There is no indication of her acquiring a special status among her companions. On the contrary, divine interaction appears to be ordinary for them.

Next, in Table 3, is an analysis of women experiences in the *Acts of Paul*. Thecla’s miraculous experiences in the arena carry a symbolic message – God acts on her behalf – and grant her a special condition that supports charismatic authority, but do not conform a communication between Thecla and the divine that is later transmitted to others. The divine intervention is directly shown to everyone in the arena and does not require Thecla

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<sup>145</sup> *The Acts of Thomas*, para.12. The citations of the book in this chapter follow the translation by Elliott, “The Apocryphal New Testament,” 2007. Exceptions will be clarified.

<sup>146</sup> *The Acts of Thomas*, para.92.

<sup>147</sup> *The Acts of Thomas*, para.158

to act as a mediator, only as a means. Therefore, these experiences do not fit the basic prophetic model proposed by Weippert and Nissinen.

TABLE 3. Weippert's and Nissinen's criteria applied to women in the *Acts of Paul*

	Divine sender	Message	Transmitter	Audience	Social Function	Predictive
21. Thecla sees the Lord in the form of Paul	✓	✓	N/A	N/A		✓
28. Tryphaena speaks to dead daughter Falconilla, in a dream	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓
IX. The Spirit comes upon Myrte	✓	✓	✓	✓	N/A	N/A

Thecla's vision of the Lord brings a *symbolic message* of his protection and election of her. It also *predicts* her victory. She speaks about it ("Paul has come to look after me"<sup>148</sup>), but from the translations it is not possible to determine if she does it out loud, to an audience, or if her saying is just a narrative thread to expose her thoughts and interior disposition.<sup>149</sup> Because of the impossibility of determining this, it has been marked as non-applicable (N/A).

The two other episodes have a clear *divine sender* and a *message* that is transmitted to others. Myrte speaks as the Spirit has "come upon her" *predicting* the success of Paul's endeavor in Rome. She seems to be in ecstasy or experiencing

<sup>148</sup> The Acts of Paul, para. 21. The citations of the book in this chapter follow the translation by Elliott, "The Apocryphal New Testament," 2007. Exceptions will be clarified.

<sup>149</sup> James, "The Acts of Paul"; Elliott, "The Apocryphal New Testament," 2007; Lamelas, *São Paulo ; Actos de Paulo e Tecla ; Carta Aos Laodicenses*.

glossolalia and clearly is taken for the purpose of sharing a message with others. It is not possible to determine the social function of her message since the text fragment is just partially preserved. Tryphaena's receives a message, *transmits* it to Thecla, and rejoices in its *predictive* purpose (that her daughter "may come to the place of the just").<sup>150</sup> However, the transmission is not public but intended to solve a private matter.

Amongst the three texts evaluated in this essay, the *Acts of Paul and Thecla* is the one with the fewest correspondences to Weippert's and Nissinen's concepts of prophecy or inspired speech. None of its episodes has a clear social function that characterizes the prophet.

At last, Table 4 presents the analysis of the episode in which Mary, in the *Gospel of Mary of Magdala*, reports to other disciple teachings she received from "the Savior" in a vision.<sup>151</sup>

TABLE 4. Weippert's and Nissinen's criteria applied to Mary in the *Gospel of Mary of Magdala*

	Divine sender	Message	Transmitter	Audience	Social Function	Predictive
5.8 to 9.1: The Savior teaches Mary of Magdala during a vision	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

The Savior, who is Jesus after the resurrection, is the *divine sender* of a message to Magdalene. He is happy to see that she does not fear the sight of him and answers her question: "So now, Lord, does a person who sees a vision see it <with> the soul <or>

<sup>150</sup> The *Acts of Thomas*, para. 28.

<sup>151</sup> From some translations it is not clear if Mary had a vision of the Lord and then received the teachings from Jesus in person or if she received this message during a second vision. King, *The Gospel of Mary of Magdala*, 13–18., presents separate translations of manuscripts. The one from the Papyrus Oxyrhynchus 3525 solves the matter, showing that their dialogue happened *during* a vision (7:1-2 : "When [the Lord] ap[peared] to m[e] in a vision, [I said]...).

with the spirit?”<sup>152</sup> He responds that a vision is seen by neither, but by the mind. After that, there is a missing extract in the manuscripts, and the text continues in the middle of a gnostic teaching that takes the form of a dialogue between the soul, the Desire, and the Powers. The soul reveals its origin, its purpose, and its destiny. In this passage lies the *predictiveness* of the message, that tells men how the soul will behave at the end of times.

When Mary of Magdala finishes her teaching, the audience reacts with distrust, but eventually decides to follow Jesus’ command to “teach and preach”<sup>153</sup>. Moments before they were hesitant because they feared to face the same punishment that the crucified Christ did. Her *social function* is obvious, guaranteeing the continuity of the work of Jesus. Her differentiation and superiority are also distinct since she is described as the Savior’s favorite, most loved person.

#### **4.2. Gender transgressions**

By engaging in prophetic experiences, women of early Christian literature break gender roles of the ancient world. Among their transgressions is an unusual way of dressing or wearing their hair, the disregard of marriage arrangements set by men, the disregard of domestic activities, the abandonment of wifely and motherhood duties, and the adoption of public functions that break the ideal of women’s passivity.

The richness of the sources used in this work and their literary span make it impossible to track every intertext and the cultural image they evoke. I chose to concentrate on those listed below, whether because they were not exhaustively analyzed in the consulted bibliography – e.g., the symbols in Perpetua’s dreams and her literal

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<sup>152</sup> *The Gospel of Mary* 7.5.

<sup>153</sup> *The Gospel of Mary* 10.14.

transformation into a male body – and represented a more enriching challenge; or because they resonate to inspired and – whenever possible – public speech.

#### 4.2.1. *Changes in attire*

After having a vision of Christ, the princess bride from the *Acts of Thomas* presents herself unveiled, bold and confident. When her parents enter her bedroom, they immediately note the shift in her attitude: “He found the face of the bride uncovered, and the bridegroom was very cheerful. And the mother came and said to the bride, ‘Why do you sit thus, child, and are not ashamed (...)?’”. She responds: “That I do not veil myself is because the mirror of shame has been taken away from me. I am no longer ashamed or abashed, since the work of shame and bashfulness has been removed from me,” she replies.<sup>154</sup>

Ancient Christian texts advocate head-covering for women as a way of masking sexual attraction that can bring trouble and shame not only upon women but also upon the men responsible for them.<sup>155</sup> By unveiling herself, the princess rejects being defined by her marital status, tutelage, or womanhood. Chastity frees her from all afflictions associated with sexual intercourse and the female gender. Her experience is described in terms of healing from a shameful past, with expressions such as “no longer” and the use of the present perfect.<sup>156</sup> She then acquires male characteristics such as rationality, fortitude, and intellectual capacity. Contrastingly, the groom describes his vision as a preventative warning (“redeemed me from falling”) from circumstances that may reach him in the future.<sup>157</sup>

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<sup>154</sup> *The Acts of Thomas*, paras.13-14.

<sup>155</sup> Kraemer, *Unreliable Witnesses*, 39; MacDonald, *Early Christian Women and Pagan Opinion*, 27–30.

<sup>156</sup> *The Acts of Thomas*, paras.13-14.

<sup>157</sup> *The Acts of Thomas*, para.15.

Still in the *Acts of Thomas*, Mygdonia puts on and off her veil in a silent battle with the desirous Charisius in defense of chastity. In their first encounter after she heard the ascetic teachings of Thomas, he finds her veiled, laying in bed, and then removes her veil and kisses her.<sup>158</sup> She refuses his company and leaves the next morning to meet the apostle again. When Charisius notes her absence, he gets angry, but tries to contain himself because “she was superior to him in richness and intelligence”.<sup>159</sup> But Mygdonia refuses to have dinner with him again and the husband tempestuously reprehends her against “deceitful and foolish words”.<sup>160</sup> Her reaction is to listen “silent like a stone”, pray, lay on bed and veil herself.<sup>161</sup>

Another change in her appearance happens right after the apostle is imprisoned. She presents herself to Charisius with “her hair cut off and her garment rent” – James translates as “hair disvehelled”<sup>162</sup> – disappointing his expectations to find her as seductive as before (“none were so good for love as she”<sup>163</sup>).

Her choice for simple clothes may hold various meanings. First, it is a demonstration of autonomy. As Charisius believes the arrest would get his marriage back on track, he accounts Mygdonia’s behavior to the apostle influence. He neglects her free-thinking and autonomous choice and reacts with surprise to her steadiness in the ascetic path. The change in attire immediately informs him and the readers that her choice is firm and not dependent on someone else’s guidance.

Secondly, we have to consider that in Antiquity a woman’s garment indicated her economic and legal state – wealthy or ordinary, free-born or slave.<sup>164</sup> Presenting herself

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<sup>158</sup> *The Acts of Thomas*, para.89.

<sup>159</sup> *The Acts of Thomas*, para.95.

<sup>160</sup> *The Acts of Thomas*, para.96.

<sup>161</sup> *The Acts of Thomas*, para.97.

<sup>162</sup> *The Acts of Thomas*, para.114.

<sup>163</sup> *The Acts of Thomas*, para.93.

<sup>164</sup> Kraemer, *Unreliable Witnesses*, 137.

more simply might have been “silent” Mygdonia’s way to express rejection of a previous status and a new life disposition. Ancient elite’s married women held an “honor, dignity, even a ‘majesty’ through which the civic, if not political, brilliance of their function manifested”.<sup>165</sup> Mygdonia’s change of clothes may manifest the exchange of earthly power and recognition for divine ones. The same is valid for Tertia, the wife of King Misdaeus converted by Mygdonia’s speech. She also shows up barefoot at home, as the slaves, surprising her husband: “And why did you come on foot, which is unbecoming in a person like you (a free-born woman)?”<sup>166</sup>

Mygdonia’s head-covering’s mentions seem strategic to help her hide from her husband and cover any sexual appeal, remain continent and demonstrate a commitment to ascetism. The princess bride uncovering is also strategic, but for a different reason. Since her groom has also accepted the ascetic calling, the ones she has to convince are her parents and governors. And she does it not through modesty, but with words. Therefore, she presents herself as bold and defiant.

The same defiant attitude is also present in Perpetua’s martyrdom. She keeps a playful attitude at the arena, repeatedly mentioning the joy of achieving such a glorious fate. In the middle of her final confrontation with a beast, she asks for a hairpin to keep her hair up because she does not want to be seen with “disheveled hair” nor “mourning in her glory.”<sup>167</sup>

Thecla, in turn, eagerly promises Paul to cut her hair off and follow him wherever he goes. The measure also resonates with Mygdonia’s wish to cover any sexual attractiveness, as Paul refuses her offer suggesting it might be insufficient to keep her

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<sup>165</sup> Duby and Perrot, *História das mulheres no Ocidente*, 1:132. My translation.

<sup>166</sup> *The Acts of Thomas*, para.137. Elliot translates as “a person like you” and James as “free-born woman”. Elliott, “The Apocryphal New Testament,” 2007; James, *The Apocryphal New Testament*.

<sup>167</sup> Roberts and Donaldson, “The Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas.” , VI.3

away from carnal temptation, as “times are evil and you are beautiful.”<sup>168</sup> It is only after she overcomes further challenges that he encourages her to “go and teach the word of God.”<sup>169</sup>

#### 4.2.2. *Disregarding family and marriage*

Except for Mary of Magdala, all women prophets in the consulted texts have some family or social conflict because they break gender roles as wives, brides or daughters. This type of conflict achieves its peak in Thecla’s story with several mentions to her shameful behavior distressing others. At a certain point, she is found in ecstasy by her groom after spending three days sitting at the window, listening to the apostle.<sup>170</sup> He then joins her mother in crying “bitterly, Thamyris (groom) for the loss of a wife, Theoclia (mother) for the loss of a child.”<sup>171</sup>

Thecla’s relationship with her mother is noteworthy, given Theoclia is the one who denounces her to the governor and asks him to burn her. Contrastingly she develops a loving relationship with Queen Tryphaena, who considers her a second child. Kraemer affirms that this contrast serves the purpose to criticize birth families and praise the settling of alternative families of believers among early Christians.<sup>172</sup>

Additionally, Kraemer observes a pattern that differentiates male and female characters’ attitudes towards Thecla. Except for Theoclia, women constantly support Thecla (e.g., virgins cry out for her in the arena, and a lioness protects her from male animals) while men act in her disfavor. Even Paul repeatedly abandons her and shows great surprise after her survival. This pattern, she argues, emphasizes female solidarity.

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<sup>168</sup> *The Acts of Paul*, para. 25.

<sup>169</sup> *The Acts of Paul*, para. 41.

<sup>170</sup> *The Acts of Paul*, para. 10. Elliot translates it as “overpowering emotion”; James as “disturbance, ecstasy”. Elliott, “The Apocryphal New Testament,” 2007; James, *The Apocryphal New Testament*.

<sup>171</sup> *The Acts of Paul*, para. 10.

<sup>172</sup> Kraemer, *Unreliable Witnesses*, 134.



Therefore, as an early Christian exemplary model, Thecla is supported by women and by converts and is abashed by her own family.

Another interesting episode in her story happens when a second man tries to marry her, and both Paul and Thecla break gender norms. A wealthy influential citizen of Antioch named Alexander brings money and gifts to Paul to negotiate marriage. In Ancient societies, marriages were commonly arranged between men. Paul, however, dismisses him by saying that Thecla is not his. Then Alexander finds Thecla and tries to force sexual intercourse. In a maneuver that requires physical strength, she dominates him and steals his belongings: “And taking hold of Alexander, she tore his cloak and pulled off his crown and made him a laughing-stock.”<sup>173</sup>

In this gender inversion, Thecla presents physical strength and aggressiveness, instead of feminine passivity. She also defies him socially, presenting herself as “a first among the Iconium,” that is, an elite citizen. The outcome of their meeting appears to offer a critique of Greco-Roman gender roles and power. Economic, political and social forces are overpowered by a Christian young woman.

Thecla’s protection of virginity is representative of a historical setting of early Christian communities. According to Brown, differently from Greco-Roman traditional custom, early Christians saw the surveillance of virginity not as a duty of the father alone as the head of the family, but also as a duty of children to keep their body pure and safe.<sup>174</sup> It is even possible, although not certain, says Brown, that Christian families were less willing than traditionalist pagans to give in marriage young girls. This does not mean that decisions to remain virgin were always welcomed by the family, as we see in the story of Thecla. But that the number of virgins increased significantly. The issue was so important

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<sup>173</sup> *The Acts of Paul*, para.26

<sup>174</sup> Brown, *The Body and Society*, 191.

that by the end of the third-century sexual violence against virgin women became a particular form of persecution to Christians.

Yet abstaining from sex was not a prerogative of virgins only. Married women like Mygdonia and the princess bride could adopt this behavior. In fact, this is a standard plot in all the apocryphal acts<sup>175</sup> and has historical correspondences in cases that led to marriage dissolutions and persecution of male teachers.<sup>176</sup>

By so doing the women and their converters break marital rules and gender roles from the Greco-Roman world, but in return, gain advantages in their religious communities. Credibility and respectfulness are some of them, and this relationship becomes even more beneficial for women prophets.

As much as early Christians had lots of manifestations of the Holy Spirit, some prophets distinguished themselves within their communities. According to Brown, they did so by positioning as “outstandingly reliable vehicles” whose public life attested their closeness to God.<sup>177</sup> One of these public marks was sexual abstinence.

The association between sexual continence and prophecy was also rooted in Jewish and pagan traditions, in which chastity, especially virginity, made the body worthy of divine possession.<sup>178</sup> In the Ancient Mediterranean, a woman's mouth was somehow associated with her vagina, as if being penetrated during intercourse reinforced her fundamental passivity and lack of authority, impeditive for prophetic speech. “Women prophets are virtually always celibate, apparently under the cultural logic that a woman

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<sup>175</sup> Burrus, *Chastity as Autonomy*.

<sup>176</sup> Justin Martyr's mid-second century critique of the Roman legal system treatment of Christians tells the story of a converted *matrona* whose ascetic conversion ultimately led to divorce. On a pay back, the ex-husband denounced her as a Christian (but she was spared by the emperor) and instigated the prosecution of her teacher Ptolomeus who was punished (presumably with martyrdom). Quoted in Kraemer, *Unreliable Witnesses*, 46–54.

<sup>177</sup> Brown, *The Body and Society*, 66.

<sup>178</sup> These associations are mentioned by Brown, 67–68; Kraemer, *Unreliable Witnesses*, 148–50.

who is penetrated by a man, and under his authority, cannot be the conduit for divine speech,” summarizes Kraemer.<sup>179</sup>

Another set of analogies mentioned by Kraemer involves speech and seed; knowledge and fertility. According to that, God is to the prophet what the husband is to the wife, and his words are a husband’s seed to a wife.<sup>180</sup>

#### 4.2.3. *Adoption of public functions*

Besides chastity, there is another type of gender transgression that women prophets perform impacting household. They assume public functions, and that keeps them away from their home. Because they are too busy answering a religious call, they fail to perform domestic activities reserved to them while assuming roles as teachers, baptizers, mostly reserved to men. Mygdonia, for instance, fails in dining and entertaining her husband at night.<sup>181</sup> Tertia (who is not a prophetess, but a new convert) leaves her husband without breakfast after spending the night out learning the gospel.<sup>182</sup> Perpetua and Felicitas do not breast-feed their children properly.

There is a tension between the public and private worlds in these women’s routine. Despite not actively questioning their domestic tasks, their role in the public sphere works as a distraction from private life. This dynamic seems to bother even Christian men, like Tertullian, who was not in disfavor of women’s prophecy as long as it was kept in individual sessions and private meetings and it did not extend to male functions.<sup>183</sup>

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<sup>179</sup> Kraemer, *Unreliable Witnesses*, 149.

<sup>180</sup> Kraemer, 249. Quoting Goodman, Jesse. Seminar paper presented at Brown University. Spring 2004.

<sup>181</sup> *The Acts of Thomas*, paras. 89-97

<sup>182</sup> *The Acts of Thomas*, para. 137

<sup>183</sup> Tertullian, consulted in Kraemer, *Women’s religions in the Greco-Roman world*, pp. 261-262 praises female prophecy (*On the Soul* 9), but condemns women’s public speaking, exorcisms and cures (*On the veiling of the virgins* 9, *On the Prescription against Heretics* 41).

Commenting on Tertullian's critique of women who used Thecla's story as a justification to teach and baptize and administer eucharist,<sup>184</sup> Kraemer argues that Tertullian seems "remarkably well aware of what, precisely, offended him about those practices."

"They violated his understanding of fundamental gender differences, which he took to be divinely ordained and inscribed in the order of creation. In Tertullian's view, which would have been widely shared, teaching, exorcising demons, healing and baptizing were all inherently masculine practices, involving activity, authority, speech and public performance. Precisely because these are by their nature masculine, they are prohibited, he insists, to women."<sup>185</sup>

She also adds that Tertullian argument is situated among a pool of Patristic authors that build a concept of heresy largely based on women's attitudes that cause social disorder and transgress gender norms.

From the *Gospel of Mary*, we learn little about Mary of Magdala's social status and family relations. Nonetheless, from the perspective of public activity, her story is priceless as she faces one of the most obvious examples of resistance to female prophets.

In the text, Mary of Magdala is said to have had a closer relationship to Jesus than the other disciples and Peter invites her to "teach" them: "Sister, we know that the Savior loved you more than all other women. Tell us the words of the Savior that you remember, the things which you know that we don't because we haven't heard them."<sup>186</sup>

However, after she teaches them, Peter and Andrew question the authenticity of her sayings: "Peter responded, bringing up similar concerns. He questioned them about the Savior: 'Did he, then, speak with a woman in private without our knowing about it? Are we to turn around and listen to her? Did he choose her over us?'"<sup>187</sup> Mary of Magdala

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<sup>184</sup> Tertullian, *On Baptism* 17.

<sup>185</sup> Kraemer, *Unreliable Witnesses*, 117–18.

<sup>186</sup> *The Gospel of Mary of Magdala*, 6.1–2.

<sup>187</sup> *The Gospel of Mary of Magdala*, 10.3–4.

cries, offended that they question her good intentions, and Levi comes out in her defense: “Levi answered, speaking to Peter, “Peter, you have always been a wrathful person. Now I see you contending against the woman like the Adversaries. For if the Savior made her worthy, who are you then for your part to reject her?”<sup>188</sup>

Peter’s contrasting attitudes stand out in the reading of these passages. At first, he praises Mary of Magdala’s proximity to the Savior and acknowledges her qualities. She only lectures because she is asked by him. But later he changes into her hardest critic. What is in her words that caused such a dramatic shift?

First, the apostle Andrew says that Mary of Magdala’s teachings are “strange.” In fact, her report of the Lord’s teachings is focused on a spiritual description with no parallel in the canonic gospels. Even though the canon is not widely established by the time the *Gospel of Mary* was produced, the apostles may be representing diverse theological positions and the conflicts deriving from it.

But there is another element in Mary of Magdala’s speech that might have turned their disposition. Her message was not received from Jesus during his life, but after his death, in a vision.

According to Karen King’s analysis, the *Gospel of Mary* portrays two challenges to the validity of Mary of Magdala’s function: the acceptance of new teachings based on revelation, and her gender.<sup>189</sup> I will treat the first in the topic about prophetic agency. Regarding gender, I note that Peter seems particularly bothered by the fact that a woman has a privileged position among the men of the group. Also, he is disturbed she is in the position of speaker and them, of listeners. This inverts the common association of men as

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<sup>188</sup> *The Gospel of Mary of Magdala*, 10.7-9.

<sup>189</sup> King, *The Gospel of Mary of Magdala*, 86–87.

masters and women as their audience that can be seen both in the apocryphal acts and in the Greco-Roman rhetorical and educational system.

Levi's comparison of Peter to "the Adversaries" is a probable reference to pagans that attacked women's behavior in their critiques of Christians. In a now widely-publicized quote, the philosopher Celsus calls Christianity a religion of "children" and "some stupid women." He also credits the belief in Christ's resurrection to the "hallucination" of some "hysterical female" or to the "fantastic tale" of a liar who wanted to "impress others".<sup>190</sup>

Yet, Levi's words may refer to other Christian groups that, in the manner of Tertullian, used women's gender transgression to disqualify some expressions of Christianity as heretical.

The text also uses several strategies to legitimize Mary of Magdala's role. One of them is its structure in dialogues, as Karen King notes.<sup>191</sup> The first dialogue happens between the Savior and the disciples, followed by his departure; the second takes place among the disciples, followed by their departure; the third is a dialogue between the Savior and Mary of Magdala, ending in her silence; and the last is a dialogue between the soul and the Powers, culminating in the soul's departure from the world.

King calls attention to the effects of this structure. It serves to announce the text content – "gospel", for the earliest Christians did not necessarily mean a story of Jesus' life or a literary genre, but rather his message – and, more importantly, to legitimate Mary of Magdala's role as a teacher.

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<sup>190</sup> Origen. *C.Cels.* 2.55; 3.55. Quoted in MacDonald, *Early Christian Women and Pagan Opinion*, 110. Later, this hysterical female in his writings was identified as Mary Magdalene. For this discussion, see MacDonald, pp.104-109.

<sup>191</sup> King, *The Gospel of Mary of Magdala*, 30–33 brings all commentaries about the use of dialogues.

The structural similarity of the first two (and main) dialogues emphasize how Mary of Magdala assumes the teaching role among the disciples that was previously played by the Savior. It “authorizes Mary's teaching and her leadership role by placing her in a position parallel to that of the Savior: it is she who steps into the Savior's place by turning the other disciples toward the Good and providing them with advanced spiritual instruction.”<sup>192</sup>

Moreover, ancient dialogue assumed the participation of the student and also a pedagogical relationship in which teacher's behavior provided a model to which disciples were expected to conform. The message in the *Gospel of Mary* is that “the following of the Savior requires both comprehension of his teaching and imitation of his actions.”<sup>193</sup> Hence Mary of Magdala – the only disciple who fully understands his message and who is not afraid to imitate him – is meant to become a teacher and to preach the word of God.

Moreover, Mary of Magdala is the only woman prophet among the ones analyzed in this work who assuredly speaks to a mixed-gender audience, as it is stated she teaches to “sisters and brothers.” Thecla, who “enlighted many by the word of God,” may have reached men and women alike although, says Kraemer, it is not clear from the accusative plural *pollous* if those “many” included men and women, only men or only women.<sup>194</sup> The differentiation matters because a woman teaching other women is not nearly as transgressive as a woman teaching other women and men or only men.

Ultimately, gender is an essential issue in the teachings of the Savior. Not because of its differences, but because of the possibility of surpassing them to the point they must not be noted. Both in his opening speech to all the disciples and in his private teaching to Mary of Magdala, he addresses the issue of the body as distinct to the spiritual, eternal

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<sup>192</sup> King, 30.

<sup>193</sup> King, 31.

<sup>194</sup> Kraemer, *Unreliable Witnesses*, 143.

and true self. The matter is what corrupts humanity, and it should be surpassed – and so does the bodily distinctions of gender – inside spiritual communities. In King's reading,

“For the *Gospel of Mary* bodily distinctions are irrelevant to spiritual character since the body is not the true self. Even as God is non-gendered, immaterial, and transcendent, so too is the true Human self. The Savior tells his disciples that they get sick and die "because you love what deceives you" (*GMary* 3:7-8). Peter's fault lies in his inability to see past the distinctions of the flesh to the spiritual qualities necessary for leadership. He apparently ‘loves’ the status his male sex-gender gives him, and that leads to pride and jealousy. The scene where Levi corrects Peter's ignorance helps the reader to see one of the primary ways in which people are deceived by the body. Authority should not be based on whether one is a man or a woman, let alone on roles of socially assigned gender and sexual reproduction, but on spiritual achievement. Those who have progressed further than others have the responsibility to care and instruct them. (...) Rejecting the body as the self opened up the possibility of an ungendered space within the Christian community in which leadership functions were based on spiritual maturity.”<sup>195</sup>

In the analyzed texts, women prophets break the ideal of female passivity with their actions. The *Gospel of Mary* goes a bit further, though, explicitly presenting a theological development in disfavor of gender biases. Mygdonia, Mnesara, the princess bride, Perpetua, Felicitas, Thecla, Tryphaena, and others teach by the example; Mary of Magdala teaches by words.

#### 4.3. True versus False Speech

Outside moments of ecstasy, prayer or inspired speech, women prophets are often silent. In the *Acts of Thomas*, Mnesara is mentioned a few times but speaks only to greet the apostle and to describe her vision. Her husband, on the other hand, gives a speech about their ascetic life as a couple.<sup>196</sup> Mygdonia is often described as a “silent” woman, who expresses gesturally and opens her mouth to teach other women and to interpret her husband's dreams. In another episode of the *Acts of Thomas*, in which a woman seeks the

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<sup>195</sup> King, *The Gospel of Mary of Magdala*, 89.

<sup>196</sup> *The Acts of Thomas*, para.150.



apostle's help to get rid of a demon who had been following her for years, the dialogue is entirely taken between the apostle and the demon. The woman stands quiet even when the demon talks directly to her.

In the *Gospel of Mary*, Mary of Magdala simply reproduces what Jesus had said to her: "After Mary had said these things, she was silent, since it was up to this point that the Savior had spoken to her."<sup>197</sup> Thecla is also quieter than her exemplary status of female authority and defiance in early Christianity might suggest. In her first appearance in the *Acts of Paul*, she spends three days and nights sitting at the window and listening to Paul. Later, she is described as an attentive listener sat at the apostles' feet.<sup>198</sup>

In her analysis of the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*, Kraemer observes that Thecla's transformation from passivity to being the woman who "enlightened many with the word of God"<sup>199</sup> happens gradually. Her first speech, the author observes, is "hardly transgressive" and consists of a formulaic prayer thanking God for saving her from the fire and allowing her to receive a vision.<sup>200</sup>

Kraemer also presents theories that place the apocryphal acts a counterpart to pastoral epistles, to which she partially consents. One of them identify women stereotypes in those stories opposing negative and positive attributes – falsehood is associated with talkative old widows and truth, with silent, pure virgins.<sup>201</sup> "The continent heroine is essentially not a speaker but a listener... If falsehoods were associated with the uncontrolled speech of old women, the rapt listening of feminine youth and purity were linked to the truth."<sup>202</sup>

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<sup>197</sup> *The Gospel of Mary*, 9.30.

<sup>198</sup> *The Acts of Paul*, paras. 8 and 18.

<sup>199</sup> *The Acts of Paul*, para. 43.

<sup>200</sup> Kraemer, *Unreliable Witnesses*, 141.

<sup>201</sup> Kraemer, 128.

<sup>202</sup> Kate Cooper, *The virgin and the bride: idealized womanhood in Late Antiquity*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1996, p. 63. Quoted in Kraemer, 140–41.

In the New Testament, especially on the pseudo-Pauline letters, there are many references to women's speech as false speech or improper teaching. In *1 Corinthians* 14.34 and 35, Paul states that it is inappropriate for a woman to speak in the church, and in *1 Tim* 2.11 and 12 he says that women should learn in submission without teaching men.

According to MacDonald, the idea that teaching is inappropriate for women comes from an association of false teaching as a typical feature of women's activities. While the institutionalization of Christian communal life increased in the second century, so did the warnings against false prophets and doctors, and the instructions for church offices.<sup>203</sup> It is in this context that *1 Tim* 4.3 warns about those who were "forbidding marriage and ordering abstinence from food that God created" - typical behaviors of ascetics, widows, and celibates. Other excerpts from *1 Tim* and *2 Tim* 3.6 place false teaching as an improper female practice. *1 Tim* 4.7 advises to "reject profane and old wives' fables."

To MacDonald, these excerpts are a Christian response to pagan critics that emphasized precisely women behavior. Among those critics are Celsus, already mentioned; Fronto, who argues that Christians "have collected from the lowest possible dregs of society the more ignorant fools together with *gullible women* (readily persuaded, as is their weak sex)";<sup>204</sup> Luciano de Samósata, who mocks "old women called widows" who told stories in the corners;<sup>205</sup> and others.<sup>206</sup>

The focus of these critics were stories told by Christian women. To MacDonald, these stories refer to the exaggerated and fabulous narratives of the apocryphal acts and

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<sup>203</sup> Lamelas, "Didaché: Doutrina Dos Apóstolos," para. XI.

<sup>204</sup> *Octavius* 8-9, in *The Octavius of Marcus Minucius Felix*, trans. G. Clarke (New York: Newman, 1974). Quoted in: MacDonald, *Early Christian Women and Pagan Opinion*, 60.

<sup>205</sup> Lucian, *The Passing of Peregrinus*, 12-13, trans. A. M. Harmon (LCL 19). Quoted in MacDonald,

<sup>206</sup> MacDonald, 49-126.

to their public teaching, strange to the Greco-Roman society and, again, destabilizing of the public versus private equilibrium.

As a conversionist religion, and gradually distancing from an eschatological perspective that awaited for a soon return of Christ, Christians felt the necessity to adapt to the Classic world in order to thrive in it. And that is the root of the repression of women behavior in the pseudo-Pauline letters (*Colossians* and *Ephesians*, whose authorship still holds some scholarly debate, and, most certainly, *Titus 1* and *2*).<sup>207</sup> Such repression, MacDonald argues, contrasts with the liberating message for women in the letters that were in fact signed by Paul.

So far, the contrasting attitudes within the Pauline corpus have troubled many biblical scholars. In addition to the arguments of time span and authorship attribution, raised by MacDonald, there are other possibilities. In a hermeneutic study of *1 Tim 2.12* ("For I do not allow a woman to teach, or have dominion over a man, but be silent"), Phillip B. Payne defends that the prohibition did not refer to women in general, but only to those who were teaching without the seal of the church of Ephesus.<sup>208</sup> According to him, the original Greek script uses a verbal form that does not refer to all female teaching, but to a specific type of teaching. Comparing it with other passages in which Paul used a broader term to refer to teaching, he concludes that in this specific case Paul refers to women who teach without being authorized by ecclesiastical leaders, that is, without being approved by the community and subject to the authority of a local "recognized" church.

The same type of imprecise translation may have influenced the reception of *1 Cor 14.34 and 35* ("Women are silent in the churches, for they are not allowed to speak,

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<sup>207</sup> MacDonald, "Reading Real Women through the Undisputed Letters of Paul," 199–200.

<sup>208</sup> Payne, "The Bible Teaches the Equal Standing of Man and Woman," 6.

but they are also subject to the law, and if they want to learn anything, ask at home to his own husbands, because it is unseemly for the woman to speak in the church").

According to Payne, the academic interpretation of the passage is divided into four lines:<sup>209</sup> there are those who believe that the text is a comment of Paul specifically addressing the self-proclaimed false prophetesses of Corinth; there are those who understand that only certain types of women, such as young virgins, should be silent because they were not ascetics, wives or widows, and did not yet have the status of an adult woman capable of exercising authority. There are, of course, those who argue that the text simply means that Paul has ordered the silence of all women in the Church.

The fourth hypothesis, which Payne personally defends, is that *1 Cor* 14.34-35 versus were not written by Paul but inserted later.<sup>210</sup> As the rest of the biblical chapter talks about prophecies and the gift of tongues, exegetes consider the location of these verses atypical and displaced. Moreover, in the older Western versions of the Greek text, verses 34 and 35 follow from what we currently have as verse 40. But in other manuscripts they follow verse 33. There is no evidence, he says, that other long passages long have been moved in Paul's writings, which makes this case unusual. Besides, that type of editing would be quite unusual for a scribe. Payne hypothesizes that someone wrote the command that women should be silent on the margin of the manuscript, and later copyists would have inserted it after verse 33 or verse 40. Payne argues that, considering the overall message of the chapter, it would be most likely that Paul's speech could have mentioned the prohibition to speak publicly not to agree with it, but to encourage all prophecy, including those from women.

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<sup>209</sup> Payne, *Man and Woman, One in Christ*, 219–25.

<sup>210</sup> Payne, 225–67.

Howsoever, it is impossible for us to attain either Paul's original writing or his intention. What is useful in this discussion is the insight that women's public religious teaching was controversial precisely because it was in progress during the writing and editing of the New Testament – although a superficial reading of prohibitions may lead to think otherwise. And that the controversy is largely due to a mismatch between Christian practices and classical social models.

The disputes over the legitimacy of women's teachings appear not only in canonical writings but in the popular literature of early Christianity as well. In the apocryphal acts, women prophets are literary constructs that display moral excellence and an ideal behavior whose standards change according to the circumstances: silent and passive at large, attending social expectations, but prolific and defiant solely to the very purpose of spreading the word and will of God.

#### **4.4. Prophetic agency: independent or instrumental?**

Women's silence outside of prophecy is also revealing of another characteristic of their prophetic action: the divine agency implied in it. The ancient perception that divinity could act through the body of a human being is strong in prophecy in general. As Nissinen poses, "as much as the human agency, more or less gendered, can be seen by today's scholars as the driving force behind the prophetic phenomenon and institution, the ancient audiences of prophecy perceived of it as based entirely on a superhuman, divine agency."<sup>211</sup>

Nissinen names "prophetic agency" this perception of a god using a human being to speak to a human audience. In his definition, it

"can be understood as *instrumental* (silenced subjectivity: prophets as passive intermediaries) as well as *independent* (endorsed

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<sup>211</sup> Nissinen, "Gender and Prophetic Agency in the Ancient Near East and in Greece," 46.

subjectivity: prophets as active agents). These types of agency are neither gender-specific nor mutually exclusive, because the prophetic agency is ultimately defined by the audience. The agency of one and the same prophet can be interpreted simultaneously as instrumental from the point of view of contemporary religious authorities, and independent from that of contemporary critics or modern scholars. When interpreted as passive intermediaries, the actual agency is ascribed to the divinity, whose authority the transmissive action of the human prophet does not threaten. When seen as active agents, the prophets, both male and nonmale, are not merely regarded as instruments of the divine agent but also as acting on their own.”<sup>212</sup>

As detailed in Chapter 1, on Biblical and ancient Greek prophecy, the prophet is considered a conduit, a *mouthpiece* of God. That notion empathizes his or her passivity. Even though prophecy may have been linked to social and political agendas as it is being demonstrated in this work, true ancient prophets were considered unbiased, plain transmitters of the words and wills of God. That notion is especially useful for women’s prophecy, providing a justification, an alibi to their gender transgressions.

The instrumental prophetic agency, that is, the trait of a simple transmitter, can be seen in the already discussed silence and passivity of Thecla, Mygdonia, and Mnesara. It is also present in Perpetua’s choice of the passive voice to describe God’s messages (“to me the Spirit prescribed,” “this was shown to me,” etc.)<sup>213</sup> However, at some point in the story, Perpetua asks for a specific vision: she wants to know what will be the result of her passion, if she will be freed or condemned. God grants her a vision in a dream at the same night, whose content she obviously cannot control.

Perpetua’s awareness of the prophetic power and her provocation of the phenomenon, could indicate that divine agency and independent agency operate simultaneously? More importantly, does she expose that agency is not a characteristic of a prophet in itself but of single prophetic episodes?

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<sup>212</sup> Nissinen, 37.

<sup>213</sup> Roberts and Donaldson, “The Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas”, I.2, I.3, II.3, II.4

The princess-bride case, from the *Acts of Thomas*, is harder to classify since she only appears in a single episode reporting a vision. As much as her intentions seem to be divinely inspired – she is spreading ascetic teachings – there is no mention of her being silent or passive and, therefore, presenting an uncharacteristic behavior during the speech. But again, to what extent is agency defined by the personality and context of the prophet and when can it be inferred from a prophetic manifestation singularly?

Tryphaena, the queen that fosters Thecla, raises similar questionings. As it is characteristic of her function, the queen rules and gives orders. Perhaps her title allows her to manifest her own agency, excusing divine inspiration. The prophetic quality of her dream is clear, as the analysis on the “Communication with the divine” topic shows. Is this also a case in which instrumental and individual prophecy coexist?

Finally, Mary of Magdala is a case in which the instrumental prophetic agency is obvious. The fact that she is a transmitter, not a creator of her speech is openly stated. “When Mary had said this, she fell silent, since it was to this point that the Savior had spoken with her,” writes the author just after her teaching.<sup>214</sup>

The critical issue here is that instrumental prophetic agency comes as a facilitator for public participation in cases in which women are incapacitated or at least find it difficult to exercise their own agency. The possibility that prophetic experiences enhanced early Christian women’s autonomy was one of the hypotheses raised at the beginning of this work. The application of instrumental prophecy agency to women who were not labeled as prophets and, especially, to those who were passive and silent in general – along with the assumption that women’s stories in the apocryphal acts reflect at least partially the experience of real women – answer positively to that hypothesis.

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<sup>214</sup> *The Gospel of Mary of Magdala* 9.1.

Working with a broader, non-coincident corpus, “obtainable from Mesopotamian, biblical, and Greek texts,” with the images of non-labeled female prophets and wives, servants, and slaves from Mari and Assyria, Nissinen gets to a similar conclusion:

“In these cases, the idea of the divine possession as a way for women to act out despite their otherwise underprivileged agency may suggest itself. The prophetic role enabled women to open their mouth in public because they were expected to talk divine words — not as themselves but as mere instruments of gods speaking through them.”<sup>215</sup>

Once established that divine agency was a notion that affected women and the perception of others on them, we can analyze how it was recognized. According to Nissinen, divine possession, despite transient, was “acknowledged by the audience.”<sup>216</sup> This public recognition came thanks to “the mark of exceptional closeness to the Spirit of God,” in Brown’s words<sup>217</sup>, or to a “demonstrable spiritual maturity,” in King’s<sup>218</sup>.

But how acknowledgment – or, as I prefer, credibility - operated? What qualities gave these women the impress of being trustworthy prophets? Still using the example of the *Gospel of Mary*, we see how credibility works when Levi attests his trust in Mary of Magdala to the fact that she was already approved by the Savior. “But if the Savior made her worthy, who are you indeed to reject her? Surely the Savior knows her very well. That is why He loved her more than us”, he says.<sup>219</sup>

At this point, the Savior himself had already approved her demonstration of maturity (“Blessed are you that you did not waver at the sight of Me.”<sup>220</sup>). She had also proved to be the only disciple to fully comprehend the Savior’s teachings and to take a leadership role in conducting the group:

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<sup>215</sup> Nissinen, “Gender and Prophetic Agency in the Ancient Near East and in Greece,” 39.

<sup>216</sup> Nissinen, 39.

<sup>217</sup> Brown, *The Body and Society*, 66.

<sup>218</sup> King, *The Gospel of Mary of Magdala*, 87.

<sup>219</sup> *The Gospel of Mary* 9.8-9.

<sup>220</sup> *The Gospel of Mary* 5.9.



“But they were grieved. They wept greatly, saying, How shall we go to the Gentiles and preach the gospel of the Kingdom of the Son of Man? If they did not spare Him, how will they spare us?”

Then Mary stood up, greeted them all, and said to her brethren, Do not weep and do not grieve nor be irresolute, for His grace will be entirely with you and will protect you.

But rather, let us praise His greatness, for He has prepared us and made us into Men.

When Mary said this, she turned their hearts to the Good, and they began to discuss the words of the Savior.”<sup>221</sup>

Thus credibility comes from two sources in Mary of Magdala’s story: a back-up from an authoritative source and outstanding behavior. The first criterion had been common for prophets throughout Antiquity. As Nissinen observes from a comprehensive sample of Near Eastern prophets, and a few Semitic and Greek examples, in most cases, “the appreciation of male and female prophets and their sayings is due to their affiliation with temples that provide them with an accredited background.”<sup>222</sup>

In early Christianity, Jesus steps in as the most accredited source. The disputes over his teachings, however, make this process not so simple. As a rule of faith is not widely spread, a mosaic of early Christianity offers a myriad of positions on prophecy in general and more specifically on women prophecy. Proto-orthodox Christianity, on the other hand, sets a few criteria to separate truth from false prophets, but there is no central source of authority established yet.

The *Gospel of Mary* offers a glimpse on Syriac Christianity’s position and its conflicts with opposing theologies (“the Adversaries”). As noted by King, the validity of Mary of Magdala’s teaching presumes the acceptance of new teachings based on revelation, since Jesus’ message was passed during a vision.<sup>223</sup> She affirms that the understanding that Jesus himself and his message – not Scripture – were the true revelation of God, is not at all strange to early Christians. For many groups, revelation

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<sup>221</sup> *The Gospel of Mary* 5.1-4.

<sup>222</sup> Nissinen, “Gender and Prophetic Agency in the Ancient Near East and in Greece” 39.

<sup>223</sup> King, *The Gospel of Mary of Magdala*, 33–34, 87–88.

included not only teachings passed during his lifetime, but also after the resurrection. Even canonical writings may be open to this interpretation. Paul considers the message that he received from Christ in a vision to be more trustworthy than the one being transmitted by humans.<sup>224</sup>

The other trait that confers credibility to Mary of Magdala is her conduct. That is also what backs up the other prophetesses analyzed here. Women in the apocryphal acts confirm their commitment to Christianity through modesty and continence and, sometimes, through miracles performed in public (which is Thecla's case). Perpetua and Felicitas do it facing martyrdom. In a dialogue in prison, Perpetua's brother says: "My dear sister, you are already in a position of great dignity, and such are that you may ask for a vision".<sup>225</sup> They are conscious that because she is a martyr, and she embraces it, she is in high esteem before God and before men.

Nissinen's and Weippert's formulation presents predictiveness as essential to the credibility of a prophet's message. However, in early Christian popular literature, greater emphasis is given to women's behavior. It is public life what defines the credibility of their prophetic speech.

This leads us to question: if women need to be in accordance with their audience's standards to be taken seriously, how limited is this similar minded audience? Is it composed of women who, like themselves, transgress gender norms? Or by men and women who at least virtually support gender transgressions? Could they have thrived in a broader environment? Or have their prophecy, and the allegedly divine agency that operated through them, found a barrier in an audience that was conservative regarding gender transgressions?

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<sup>224</sup> Galatians 1.11-24.

<sup>225</sup> Roberts and Donaldson, "The Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas," para. 1.3.

#### 4.5. Prophetesses in early Christian popular literature

Are there women prophets in the *Acts of Thomas*, *Acts of Paul*, *Gospel of Mary* and *Passion of Perpetua and Felicitas*? According to Weippert's and Nissinen's definition of prophecy, yes, there are. In Perpetua's proliforous dreams/visions and other sensorial or ecstatic experiences, we can identify a process of predictive communication with the divine that grants her a special status among her fellows and even differentiates her from other women. The same happens to Tryphaena and Myrte from the *Acts of Paul*; to Mygdonia, to the princess bride and, to some extent, to Mnesara from the *Acts of Thomas* and to Mary of Magdala in the *Gospel of Mary*. Surprisingly, it does not happen with Thecla, the extensively investigated apostle of Paul, whose authority to teach and baptize comes from miraculous, but not prophetic, experiences.

The comparison work that allowed this conclusion to be drawn was clear most of the times, with plainly recognizable traits. However, some cases require further clarification. Concerning the transmission, four of Perpetua's and Thomas' prophetic episodes show no intention to transmit a verbal or written message. However, practices can be seen as "texts," as Clifford Geertz posited.<sup>226</sup> Prophetic manifestations could be defined as such or, in Weippert terms, as symbolical acts, and, therefore, intuitive prophecy.

Moreover, ecstasy and sensorial episodes are shorter or less frequent than visions/dreams. Did writers and editors value them less? Although an author's intention can never be fully reached, and literary sources are rhetorical constructions that do not necessarily reflect social data, as Elizabeth Clark reminds us, a contextualized approach

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<sup>226</sup> Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*.

can be helpful to the discussion of how prophecy was used in early Christian communities.<sup>227</sup>

Additionally, women's experiences have more in common with Weippert's definition of the divine communication process than with Nissinen's contributions. Nissinen based his model mostly upon Greek, Ancient Near Eastern, and Hebrew references. Although that is the foundation of early Christian beliefs, a model that considers the specifications of the householding Christianity may be better suited. By suggesting this, I do not intend to walk back on the authors' intention to set a model sufficiently vast to be adopted by scholars of different religious traditions. Nevertheless, I do feel the model leaves out an important issue of early Christianity, namely the displacement of the temple from a public civic building to the body.<sup>228</sup>

While ancient religion was primarily defined by civic cults with ceremonies performed in public temples, early Christian gatherings happened in private places, and the human body was considered the "temple of the Holy Spirit."<sup>229</sup> This shift has impacted the rise of ascetism. Could it have opened space for spontaneous, almost ordinary prophecy? Indeed, Perpetua, Tryphaena, Myrte, and their female companions seem much closer to intuitive, inspired prophecies than to deductive, professional ones.

Another discrepancy in Nissinen's criteria is that the predictive character is only one among many purposes of early Christian prophetic speech identified by Aune. To predictiveness, Aune adds assurance, announcements of salvation, announcements of judgments, legitimation, and eschatological theophany as basic forms of prophetic speech.<sup>230</sup> Moreover, as mentioned in Chapter 3, during the Second Temple Period, Jews

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<sup>227</sup> Clark, "Holy Women, Holy Words: Early Christian Women, Social History, and the 'Linguistic Turn,'" 430.

<sup>228</sup> Brown, *The Body and Society*.

<sup>229</sup> I Corinthians 6.19.

<sup>230</sup> Aune, *Prophecy in Early Christianity and the Ancient Mediterranean World*, 317–38.

and Christians already saw prophets not only as predictors of the future but as advocates of moral values<sup>231</sup> and in New Testament literary context, the understanding of prophecy is broadened to include preachers involved in public speaking and teaching<sup>232</sup>. If we expand the comprehension of prophecy to include these characteristics, more women's experiences can be validated. The social function could include, for instance, the conversionist role that Thecla assumes. Howsoever, the social validation of women's prophecy in the early Christian popular literature comes not from predictiveness but from an approved public behavior.

Finally, an important question that arises when we classify women in these stories as prophets is why were these women not credited as such during the writing and editing processes of those texts. Not even in the *Acts of Thomas* – a text related to traditions more open to charismatic authority such as Gnosticism and Syrian Christianity.

There are two possible answers to that. The first is that prophecy might have become so trivial in Early Christian communities that authors felt no need to mark it expressively. According to David E. Aune, early Christians were so accustomed to gifted experiences that commonly modern scholars (among which he is not included) defend all early Christians were potential prophets.<sup>233</sup> That might explain why the women in these stories have not claimed the title of prophets.

Many early Christian Patristic authors speak about atypical situations, what they consider to be deviations, heresies. In this way, normative behavior is not always expressively described but has to be inferred as opposite to deviation. Considering that, the silence about women's prophecy could also demonstrate that the issue was not particularly problematic, and therefore, not worth mentioning.

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<sup>231</sup> Wilson, "Current Issues in the Study of New Testament Prophecy," 38.

<sup>232</sup> Nissinen, "What is prophecy? An Ancient Near Eastern Perspective", 19.

<sup>233</sup> Aune, *Prophecy in Early Christianity and the Ancient Mediterranean World*, 200–201.

Oppositively, the second possibility is that women's "prophecy" was intentionally left out of those texts. In my opinion, this seems more probable considering that dispute among early Christianities had a strong focus on charismatic authority and female gender transgressions.

Whilst a rule of faith was developed and spread, Christianity may have gone through a process similar to what Jewish prophecy underwent during the Second Temple period, when a spontaneous, "somewhat wild and precarious quality of prophecy had to be disciplined to meet the requirements of the authoritative theology or theologies."<sup>234</sup> Even if prophecy did not cease in practice at all, as Laura Nasrallah suggests on her criticism of the "model of decline," it certainly became less visible on the textual sources that we access today. Their reading might at first lead us to believe that prophecy, namely women's prophecy, was not current because it is not mentioned in the sources or because it is mentioned as a prohibition. Contextualization of the sources, however, shows that conservation and propagation of religious writings is an intentional process that privileges orthodox authors and, actively or passively, erases other Christianity's records.

Another aspect that weakens the first possible explanation for women's prophecies not being explicitly mentioned is that women's prophecy did not go unnoticed at all. Authors from the second to the fourth century, contemporary to the texts analyzed here, make it a frequent topic – Tertullian, in his criticism of women's offices and authority; Eusebius on his report of women's false inspired speech among Montanists, and Epiphanius in his *Medicine Box*, listing women's practices as illnesses of the spirit.<sup>235</sup> The simple title of the latter highlights the deviant approach dedicated to female prophecy.

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<sup>234</sup> Nissinen, "What Is Prophecy? An Ancient Near Eastern Perspective," 30.

<sup>235</sup> Tertullian, *On Baptism* 17, *On the Veiling of the Virgins* 9, *On the prescription against Heretics* 41; Eusebius, *History of the Church* 5.16; Epiphanius *Medicine Box (Panarion)* 49. All consulted in Kraemer, *Women's Religions in the Greco-Roman World*, 259–61, 265–66 and 264, subsequently.

Not all the opposers to prophecy are necessarily orthodox. Tertullian, for example, is associated with Montanists, and accepts female prophecy as long as it is confined to specific standards, which shows that the prophecy topic is indeed relevant and controversial to be debated even among its practitioners. The inclusion of the debate in canonical New Testament writings also confirms the relevance of the topic and weakens the hypothesis that women were not classified as prophets by omission.

The label could also be suppressed in those stories to avoid scandal and unwanted attention, in a strategy of self-censorship that, in return, would allow stories to circulate more freely. There were certainly advantages in having a more symbolic than an explicit message.

Again, we cannot fully and safely access author's intention, but we can work with reception. A work of recovery and classification of women's prophecy is also a work of recognition of women's public participation in public religious life.

## 5. The rhetoric of prophetic speech

“The human voice was fashioned for one reason alone – to be the threshold through which the sentiments of the heart, inspired by the Holy Spirit, might be clearly translated into the Word itself.” This quotation, from Gregory of Nissa, is transcribed by Averil Cameron as an example of the early Christian belief that one’s voice and linguistic abilities were to be put at the service of God.<sup>236</sup> In the manner of ancient rhetors that nurtured their voices and trained communication skills, early Christians were quite aware of the importance of language, textuality, and speech.

This awareness was rooted in Judaism, which as the first of the “religions of the book,” placed special emphasis on revelation through textual writing and Scripture. But it was also a particular feature of early Christians who felt that the biblical promises had been fulfilled among them – including the promise of speaking in new tongues on the last days.<sup>237</sup> They also felt those times were boosted by a divinely sent communication power to deliver a universal and inclusive message. From that desire, came new forms of utterance and, eventually, new forms of writing.

The intense role of discourse within early Christianity is well acknowledged by New Testament scholars.<sup>238</sup> Without disregard of the economic and political factors that were fundamental to the rise of Christianity, they emphasize how work on words, language, and speech built Christian thought and how it was strategically used to insert this way of thinking into the culture and politics of the Roman Empire.

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<sup>236</sup> *Comm. On Song of Songs* 7.9333M, p.235, ll.3-5 (Longerbeck ed.). In: Cameron, *Christianity and the Rhetoric of Empire*, 15.

<sup>237</sup> Wilder, *Early Christian Rhetoric*, 5–12. discusses the role of glossolalia in the “new utterance.”

<sup>238</sup> Cameron, *Christianity and the Rhetoric of Empire*, 2.



“Christianity was not just ritual. It placed an extraordinary premium on verbal formulation; speech constituted one of its basic metaphors, and it framed itself around written texts”, observes Cameron.<sup>239</sup> Additionally, she notes that the effective manipulation of discourse was fundamental for Christianity to transition from a marginal cult to a dominant religion.

The role of discourse in this transition was important enough to lead the French historian Maurice Sachot to name the Christian strategy as a “semantic coup.”<sup>240</sup> According to him, the semantic coup happened as Christians subverted the concept of *religio* from its original meaning in pagan context to a set of rites, doctrines, and practices, which is what we still understand as “religion” in modern common sense. By intellectually building a new understanding of *religio*, Christianity established itself as the only true and valid *religio* while other traditions were identified as *superstitio*, subverting a categorization that first placed Christianity as a *superstitio*. Only after this linguistic shift was implemented, he says, institutional changes favoring Christianity came to happen.

Sachot also emphasizes how Christians mimicked philosophical schools of thought “claiming the title of *didaskalos* (<< teacher>>) and funding the *didaskaleia* (<<schools>>) in which they <<taught>> (*didaskein*) to <<disciples>> (*mathètai*) the Christian <<teaching>> (*didaskalia*, *didachè*, *mathémata*).”<sup>241</sup> His argument is that Christians built their way into the Roman Empire through words and intellectual formulation.

Christians’ imitation strategy came from a being conscious of the importance of discourse on Late Antique societies, as well of the pedagogical power of rhetoric. From

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<sup>239</sup> Cameron, 19.

<sup>240</sup> Sachot, *A Invenção de Cristo: Gênese de Uma Religião*, 183–207. My translation.

<sup>241</sup> Sachot, 146.

the very beginning, Christian writings were “rooted in the attempt to attract and convince persons of the Hellenistic world, be they already Christians, Jews or pagans.”<sup>242</sup> Trying to attract this broad audience, they appealed to symbols and manners of expression that were common in a broad cultural context. It was a way of “working the familiar, appealing the known to [present] the unknown.”<sup>243</sup>

Cameron defends this idea referring to rhetoric in a loose sense, as set of manners of expressions common throughout the Empire, but not necessarily based on formal observance of classic principles of rhetoric. Still according to her, the early Christians had an ambiguous relation to classic rhetoric: as much as they sought for effective communication, the conflict between pagan cultural education and a new faith made them hostile (or reluctant, at least) to the classic tradition.

Michel Banniard explains this conflict detailing that although Christians from the east were more keen to openly adopt classic rhetoric - as in the example of Clement of Alexandria - Latin Church Fathers such as Tertullian, Cyprian and Ambrose also assumed this ancient heritage.<sup>244</sup> The techniques and resources of classical rhetoric, however, would only be entirely legitimated in theoretical terms with Augustine, in *De Doctrina Christiana*.

Besides the conversionist and pedagogical intention, early Christian interest for speech came from a genuine inclination to language and speech. The centrality of discourse in Christianity started with Jesus, who taught orally through dialogues and parables and did not leave written accounts. Then, it was settled with Paul, a Roman citizen with a classical education that, unlike the Judeo-Christians who defended

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<sup>242</sup> E.Schussler Fiorenza, “Miracles, Mission and Apologetics: An introduction,” in *Aspects of Religious Propaganda in Judaism and Early Christianity*. Notre Dame, Ind: Notre Dame University Press, 1976. Quoted by Cameron, *Christianity and the Rhetoric of Empire*, 38.

<sup>243</sup> Cameron, 25.

<sup>244</sup> Banniard, *Génese Cultural da Europa*, 58–65.

compliance to the laws of the Old Testament, held a posture of relativization of the Law, and claimed the universality of Jesus' message, that could be inclusive and, more importantly, actively seek to penetrate other cultures.

The generations following Paul – the ones who proclaimed and wrote the texts analyzed in this work – distanced themselves from Judaism and built a new religious practice through modes of living and communal disciplines, and also through discourse.<sup>245</sup> This discourse was disputed and disciplined in internal battles as Christians tried to define their faith and control unorthodox discourses. As a consequence, “soon [after Paul] the emphasis on verbal formulation of faith would impose an authority of discourse.”<sup>246</sup>

Christian discourses about prophecy are situated exactly among these debates, representing a dispute about knowledge – who has access to “real” divine knowledge and has the right to disseminate it.<sup>247</sup> Different Christian writings, as the canonical texts, the apocrypha, the martyrdom accounts, and the Patristic treatises, mark different stages in the construction of an organized system of thought and expression. This process is not necessarily linear and definitely not peaceful as there are many different discourses among early Christians. Therefore, Christian writings were not unintentionally and carelessly built. Rather they represent careful rhetorically build constructions.

Aware of the importance that Christianity places on discourses and of how discourses are crossed by different intentions, I have discussed in the previous chapters, what kind of texts portray prophecy (chap.1) and in what ways they relate to the general culture and gender norms of the Empire (chaps. 3 and 4). In this chapter, I will ask: What rhetorical strategies do they use to persuade both non-converted people and other

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<sup>245</sup> Cameron, *Christianity and the Rhetoric of Empire*, 19–21.

<sup>246</sup> Cameron, 19.

<sup>247</sup> Nasrallah, *An Ecstasy of Folly*, 5.

Christians? What manners of expression are characteristic of women's prophetic speech and writing?

To answer these questions, I will adopt a double understanding of rhetoric. Primarily, I will understand it in a loose sense as modes of expression and textual construction in order to persuade. To perceive how rhetoric operates, I will look for biblical themes and parallels in the texts and also for rhetorical devices that were identified by Amos Wilder and Cameron in their analysis of the canonical New Testament and apocryphal acts: biblical themes and phraseology; use of parables and dialogues, figurative qualities (metaphor, allegory, visions and miracles), myths and stories; and spiritual biographies.<sup>248</sup>

Secondly, I will refer to classical rhetoric and, in that sense, I adopt Aristotelian categories to find patterns and ways in which the texts unfold. I will observe how the texts use argumentation, emotion, and the character of the orator, which are the three forms of persuasion that Aristoteles lists.<sup>249</sup> By so doing I do not intend to establish a detailed comparison between Christian writing and classical rhetoric. As much as the connections exist, it is not my main goal here to do a literary comparison. Instead, I will simply take Aristotelian indications as a guide to unfold patterns of expression in women's prophetic speech in early Christian popular literature.

### **5.1. Rhetoric of the *Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas***

More than a "diary of dreams"<sup>250</sup>, this text is a praise of the virtue of the martyrs and of the resourcefulness of prophecy. It could, therefore, fit into the epideictic genre of

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<sup>248</sup> Wilder, *Early Christian Rhetoric*. He elaborates on early Christian rhetoric on the canonical gospels. Cameron, *Christianity and the Rethoric of the Empire*, does so on the apocryphal acts and patristics texts up to the sixth-century. Interestingly, they point similar rhetorical features on both corpora.

<sup>249</sup> Alexandre Júnior, Alberto, and Pena, *Retórica*, 27–28.

<sup>250</sup> Miller, "Perpetua and Her Diary of Dreams," 148.

classical rhetoric, whose definition is to dissertate about present events emitting a value judgment, whether for praise or censorship.<sup>251</sup> This text also integrates the specific genre of martyrs' acts in early Christian literature. Although the nature of martyrdom may refer to forensic speech, Perpetua's performance in front of authorities is concise, with little argumentation, as we will see below. Assuming this is a historical account and that the writer was aware of her role as a transmitter<sup>252</sup>, I shall understand the entire text as a speech in my analysis.

According to Aristotelian rhetoric, the discourse is divided ideally into four parts: Introduction, Statement of the Case (*narratio* in Latin terminology)<sup>253</sup>, Argument (demonstration of proofs) and Epilogue, being the second and the third essential parts.<sup>254</sup> That is precisely the semantical structure of the *Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas*. Formally, it is divided in a Preface written by an editor, three chapters attributed to Perpetua and one to Saturus with the narration of events and two final chapters added by the editor.

In classical rhetoric, the function of the introduction is to make clear the purpose of the discourse – praise or censure, in the epideictic cases – and prepare the listener for what follows.<sup>255</sup> Perpetua's editor fulfills this task by explaining that the purpose of the account is to honor God and strengthen personal faith. He also projects its future importance, persuading the contemporary readers that they are facing a valuable material: "These modern examples will one day become ancient and available for posterity (...) by reason of the presumed veneration for antiquity".<sup>256</sup>

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<sup>251</sup> *Rhetoric* Book II.3. In Roberts, *Rhetoric*, 15.

<sup>252</sup> As explained on Chapter 4, p. 39-40.

<sup>253</sup> Alexandre Júnior, Alberto, and Pena, *Retórica*, 207. I consulted both Portuguese and English translations. Overall, I quote the English translation, but in a few cases of obscure or imprecise terms I also comment on the Portuguese translation.

<sup>254</sup> *Rethoric*, Book III.13-19. Roberts, *Rhetoric*, 166–83.

<sup>255</sup> *Rhetoric*, Book III.14. In: Roberts, 167.

<sup>256</sup> *The Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas*, preface.

Moreover, the editor includes readers among his reasons for having edited the account, creating a sense of common interest and sharing: “What we have heard and handled, declare also to you, brethren and little children, that as well you who were concerned in these matters may be reminded of them again to the glory of the Lord, as that you who know them by report may have communion with the blessed martyrs...” In this way, he attends Aristotle’s recommendation that “in speeches of display we must make the hearer feel that the eulogy includes either himself or his family or his way of life or something or other of the kind.”<sup>257</sup>

The Preface also brings an Old Testament verse that is one of the favorites of charismatic groups:<sup>258</sup> “in the last days, saith the Lord, I will pour out of my Spirit upon all flesh; and their sons and their daughters shall prophesy. And upon my servants and my handmaidens will I pour out of my Spirit; and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams.”<sup>259</sup>

After the Introduction, the account’s organization continues according to classic principles. One of these principles is the articulation of the Narration in sections, not in a continuous flow.<sup>260</sup> Each section has a short introduction that announces its content. Another principle is the Argumentation of events as “noble and useful”.<sup>261</sup> The last paragraph works an Epilogue, in which the editor 1) positions martyrs as good people; 2) amplifies their experience with words of greatness (“O most brave and blessed martyrs! O truly called and chosen...!”<sup>262</sup>); 3) provokes the readers’ emotion of compassion; and 4) reviews what was said in the introduction.<sup>263</sup>

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<sup>257</sup> *Rhetoric*, Book III.14. In: Roberts, *Rhetoric*, 170.

<sup>258</sup> The verse is mentioned in Montanist texts, according to Kraemer, “Woman and Gender,” 473.

<sup>259</sup> *Joel* 2:28-29.

<sup>260</sup> *Rhetoric*, Book III.16. In Roberts, *Rhetoric*, 173.

<sup>261</sup> *Rhetoric*, Book III.17. In Roberts, 176.

<sup>262</sup> Roberts and Donaldson, “The Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas,” para. VI.4.

<sup>263</sup> *Rhetoric* III.19. In Roberts, *Rhetoric*, 181–83.

Regarding content, Perpetua and her editor appeal to the emotions of the audience and to the character of the orator as a mean of persuasion. By convincing the readers of Perpetua's virtue and exceptional proximity to God – to which the prophecies, specifically instrumental prophecy, work as proof – they build her character as trust-worthy.

They also resort to a series of elements listed by Aristotle as favorable to emotional persuasion, namely:

#### *5.1.1. Anger and Indignation*

Anger indisposes the audience against the contrary part of a speech, and Indignation is set in progress by underserved misfortunes.<sup>264</sup> Perpetua and her editor make her adversaries look bad in several situations. For instance: after she refuses to offer sacrifice to the emperor, the prosecutor commands an assault to her father, who is not even on trial. She is forced to watch him get beaten and grieves “for his wretched old age.”<sup>265</sup>

Authorities also treat her group with more severity than usual on different occasions, including an attempt to force them to dress as pagan priests and priestess, which violates the previous agreement between them. The treatment dispensed to the martyrs causes the audience in the amphitheater to react with indignation. The editor describes this moment in detail, assuring that if the situation itself is not enough to arouse outrage in the literary audience, the description of the behavior of the amphitheater audience suggest compassion: “Injustice acknowledged the justice; the tribune yielded to their being brought as simply as they were.” “The tribune shuddered and blushed, and commanded that they should be kept with more humanity.”<sup>266</sup>

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<sup>264</sup> *Rhetoric*, Book II.2 and 9. In: Roberts, 70–71 and 93.

<sup>265</sup> Roberts and Donaldson, “The Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas,” para. II.2.

<sup>266</sup> Roberts and Donaldson, para. V.3; VI.1.

In the visions, the only adversary mentioned is an Egyptian man with whom Perpetua had to fight for her life. His description, as being “horrible in appearance” is also intended to turn the audience against him.<sup>267</sup>

### 5.1.2. *Friendship*

According to Aristotle, this feeling influences an audience through identification and sense of safety: “We feel friendly to those who have treated us well, either ourselves or those we care for, whether on a large scale, or readily, or at some particular crisis; provided it was for our own sake. (...) And also to our friends’ friends (...), to the morally good (...), to those whom we admire”.<sup>268</sup>

Perpetua explores Friendship by positioning as someone who sacrifices herself individually for the sake of an entire community of believers. The sacrifice can have a literal meaning, as someone who filled a quota – the authorities did not sacrifice *all* Christians, but a few, using them as an example and threat to others. And it can have a metaphorical meaning, overlapping the figure of the martyr to that of Christ as the holy lamb who sacrificed himself for all humankind.<sup>269</sup> Her initiative to leave a written record also shows consciousness of the role of martyrs as exemplary.

However, despite Perpetua’s awareness as a writer, it is the editor who openly explores this rhetorical feature. His writing is full of adjectives that position Perpetua as morally good, modest, brave, and exemplary. With that, he ensures that Perpetua is seen as an example and as someone to whom any Christian could relate, that could awaken anyone’s feelings of friendship.

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<sup>267</sup> Roberts and Donaldson, para. IV.2.

<sup>268</sup> *Rhetoric*, Book II.4.

<sup>269</sup> John 1.26.



### 5.1.3. *Pity*

In Aristotle's definition, pity is the contrary of Indignation. It is a pain caused by the sight of something evil happening to someone who does not deserve it.<sup>270</sup> Perpetua's diary appeals to it by showing the good qualities of the martyrs that made their death unreasonable and undeserving. For example, she describes herself and Felicitas as dedicated mothers suffering from anxiety for not being able to breast-feed their children properly and for the children's future.

In his turn, the editor describes Perpetua as a "respectably born, liberally educated, a married woman"<sup>271</sup> - an exemplary citizen who is under punishment. Additionally, the factual circumstances of Perpetua's prison are barely mentioned. We know little about the accusation and the details of the arrest, and we hear nothing about the potential damage this prominent citizen causes to the Empire by refusing to offer sacrifice to traditional gods. It is also a rhetorical strategy to ignore or mention very briefly unfavorable arguments while largely depicting favorable arguments.

Observing classical rhetoric in the sections attributed to Perpetua and her editor, it is easy to note that he is much keener on the adoption of these principles than she is. First, because his entire editorial organization of the text follows a rhetorical model. Secondly, because he massively resorts to the character of the orator while Perpetua doesn't - at least not directly. Her consciousness of her power as a martyr may show that her writing in itself is a claim for the positive imagery that surrounds the martyr figure. In early Christianity, voluntary martyrs were seen as exemplary imitators of Christ.<sup>272</sup> However, that is a metaphorical, extra-textual factor.

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<sup>270</sup> *Rhetoric*, Book II.8. In Roberts, *Rhetoric*, 90.

<sup>271</sup> Roberts and Donaldson, "The Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas," para. I.1.

<sup>272</sup> Moss, "The Discourse of Voluntary Martyrdom," 550.

The editor's aim to persuade is stronger as it is explicit. Thirdly, although both of them appeal to emotion, he is more incisive in his writing, adjectivizing and adopting hyperbolic expressions. Perpetua has a more contained and descriptive language. Her sayings at the town-hall and at the arena are brief and barely constitute speeches. They make no Statement of Case and Argumentation, except for the occasion in which she protests against dressing as a priestess.

The difference in their styles is particularly interesting for what it shows about the authorship of the *Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas*. Although most scholars treat the text as an account written by a historical woman and later compiled by an editor, there are still discussions on the influence of the editor in the final form of her writing; on the identity of the editor, mostly believed to be Tertullian; and even if she wrote anything at all or if the text was a later writing forged as a diary.

Showing that the sections attributed to Perpetua and to the editor have different styles reinforces the hypothesis that there are two distinct writers. And knowing the editor's inclination to classical rhetoric increases its possible identification as Tertullian, who had access to rhetoric and paid attention to it in his writings.<sup>273</sup>

Moving the rhetorical analysis to Perpetua's visions, we see that in these descriptions, she is more prolific, yet still descriptive, making no argumentation. The use of signs, wonders, and visions – as well as of textual metaphors and allegories that she adopts – is a common strategy in early Christian literature to express symbolic messages, mysteries that could not be entirely apprehended by human logic and word.<sup>274</sup>

In Perpetua's first vision, she climbs a ladder that culminates in a place inhabited by a white-haired shepherd and thousands of people. There is an obvious metaphor to life

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<sup>273</sup> Cameron, *Christianity and the Rhetoric of Empire*, 85. She observes that Tertullian's works reveal knowledge and proximity to pagan writers.

<sup>274</sup> Cameron, 57–60.

after death in heaven that she understands as a sign of how her martyrdom will end. It also brings the biblical representation of God as a shepherd breeding his sheep, the humans, which is common in the Old Testament and in Jesus' teachings about the Father.<sup>275</sup>

In addition to this reading, Patricia Cox Miller notes other biblical patterns in the vision of the ladder: in *Genesis* 28, Jacob sees a ladder stretching from earth to heaven, and that theme is re-appropriated in the *Gospel of John* 1.51. Perpetua's confrontation with a serpent during the climbing also resembles *Genesis* 3.15 and *Apocalypse* 12.<sup>276</sup>

This episode ends with a sensorial experience, in which Perpetua awakes still tasting the flavor of the milk she was fed with by the shepherd. The continuity of the sensation works as a figurative representation of the continuity of the dream – its revelation and consequent impact - in real life.

In Perpetua's second vision, revelation also comes in a figurative quality. She sees her thirsty dead brother trying to drink water from a pool that is too high for him to reach. She interprets he is in a place of suffering and prays to change his situation. Then, in another vision, he is shown drinking water from a pool with a lowered margin in his stature. That means "he was translated from the place of punishment."<sup>277</sup> Besides the figurative description, this vision brings a biblical parallel. Her vision of a dead thirsty person she cannot approach because there is a barrier between them resembles the passage of Lazarus and the thirsty rich men separated by an abyss.<sup>278</sup>

Ultimately, on her final vision, Perpetua fights the Egyptian. There is a detailed description of garments and bodily features in this episode, and before the battle began, Perpetua "was stripped, and became a man." The apparent symbolism of this passage

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<sup>275</sup> Luke 15.4-7.

<sup>276</sup> Miller, "Perpetua and Her Diary of Dreams," 155.

<sup>277</sup> Roberts and Donaldson, "The Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas," para. II.4.

<sup>278</sup> Luke 16.19-31.

where Perpetua acquires male characteristics – aggressiveness, strength, reliability – has been successfully identified by many of Perpetua’s commentators and I will not linger on it.<sup>279</sup> Instead, I prefer to highlight that the Egyptian’s identification to the devil is not only attested by her final interpretation (“I perceived that I was not to fight with the beasts but with the devil”), but also by the moment when she treads upon his head.<sup>280</sup> In the Bible, Eve’s descendants are meant to perform this gesture,<sup>281</sup> and Christ calls his followers to do it too.<sup>282</sup>

Another passage worthy of attention is a dialogue in which Perpetua uses an allegory to explain her identity to her father: “‘Father,’ said I, ‘do you see, let us say, this vessel lying here to be a little pitcher, or something else?’ And he said, ‘I see it to be so.’ And I replied to him, ‘Can it be called by any other name than what it is?’ And he said, ‘No.’ ‘Neither can I call myself anything else than what I am, a Christian.’”<sup>283</sup>

In Antiquity, religion represented a person’s cultural identity, ethnicity, and territoriality, something someone was already born with. As the first religion of choice, Christianity was *something else*. The fact that Perpetua uses an allegory to explain her identity is revealing of the vagueness of the term, and of Christians’ own understanding of this new *religio*.

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<sup>279</sup> Louis Robert, “Une Vision de Perpetué martyre à Carthage en 203”. *Académie des Inscriptions et Belles Lettres, Comptes rendus des séances de l’année 1982*. Paris: Auguste Picard, 1982, 228-276; Augustine, *Sermons* 280 – 282; Brown, *The Body and the Society*; Peter Dronke, *Women Writers of the Middle Ages*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984; Jacqueline Amat. *Songes et Visions*. Paris: Etudes Augustiniennes, 1985. Quoted in Miller, “Perpetua and Her Diary of Dreams,” 163,171,183.

<sup>280</sup> Roberts and Donaldson, “The Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas,” para. III.2.

<sup>281</sup> Genesis 3.15.

<sup>282</sup> Luke 10.19.

<sup>283</sup> Roberts and Donaldson, “The Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas,” para. I.2.

## 5.2. Rhetoric of the *Gospel of Mary of Magdala*

The *Gospel of Mary of Magdala* resembles the epideictic and deliberative genres of classical rhetoric. The epideictic genre, proper of discussions about virtue,<sup>284</sup> appears in explanations about the nature of men and of God (chapters 2, 3 and 7) and the deliberative genre, proper of assemblies and collective consultations,<sup>285</sup> appears in the disputes about the Savior's and Mary of Magdala's teachings (chapters 5 and 9).

The text is formatted in dialogues, which set a parallel between the Savior and Mary of Magdala as teachers and of others as students, and stresses their pedagogical action, as already explained in Chapter 5 of this thesis. In addition to that, it is worth noting that the dialogue is a common feature of early Christian rhetoric – it is used in Jesus' teachings in the New Testaments and in God's direct communication to prophets in the Old Testament – with a specific purpose.

According to Cameron, the *Gospel of Mary of Magdala's* dialogues emulate Greek philosophical dialogues to present authoritative positions disguised under the impression of a “real” debate.

“Christian dialogues were not innocent literary productions: their purpose was to influence thought, and in many cases also to demonstrate the weakness of opposing arguments, whether those of imaginary Jews, doctrinal rivals or, later, Muslims, and while still casting their own arguments in dialogue form they used all possible techniques of polemic, classification, proof texts and appeals to authority and hierarchy. It is true, then, that they do not represent open-ended discussion, because, to resort to an over-used cliché, they are about power, or, at least, about the assertion of authority in a highly competitive situation.”<sup>286</sup>

That appears to be the case of the *Gospel of Mary of Magdala*, which transmits a gnostic understanding of the body and the soul, and of the charismatic authority while

<sup>284</sup> *Rhetoric*, Book I.9. In Roberts, *Rhetoric*, 38.

<sup>285</sup> Alexandre Júnior, Alberto, and Pena, *Retórica*, 25.

<sup>286</sup> Cameron, “Dialoguing in Late Antiquity,” chap. 3.: <https://chs.harvard.edu/CHS/article/display/5524.averil-cameron-dialoguing-in-late-antiquity>

presenting opposing arguments in the mouth of “wrathful” people, identified to the “adversaries.”<sup>287</sup>

Classical rhetoric appears in the characterization of opposers as despicable in a deliberation dialogue about the validity of Mary of Magdala’s teaching. When Peter questions her authority, he does so using an enthymeme with the hidden premises that 1) respectful masters do not dedicate time exclusively to women; 2) respectful men should not be taught by women; 3) a respectful master would not privilege women over men, preferring male or mixed-gendered audiences: “He questioned them about the Savior: “Did he, then, speak with a woman in private without our knowing about it? Are we to turn around and listen to her? Did he choose her over us?”<sup>288</sup>

The enthymeme is a “form of syllogism or argument in which one of the premises or one of the arguments is implied.”<sup>289</sup> This premise contains an opinion of common knowledge so that it can be easily assumed, and the audience and orator can build a conclusion from common ground.<sup>290</sup>

Levi, who is in Mary’s side, reacts with an example and an enthymeme, using the hidden premise that questioning Mary of Magdala’s teaching is questioning the Savior’s first command that says: “Go then, preac[h] the good news about the Realm. [Do] not lay down any rule beyond what I determined for you, nor promulgate law like the lawgiver, or else you might be dominated by it.”<sup>291</sup> In Levi’s argumentation, “we should clothe ourselves with the perfect Human, acquire it for ourselves as he commanded us, and announce the good news, not laying down any other rule or law that differs from what the

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<sup>287</sup> *The Gospel of Mary of Magdala* 10.7.

<sup>288</sup> *The Gospel of Mary of Magdala* 10.3-4.

<sup>289</sup> “Entimema”. *E-dicionário de termos literários*.

<http://edtl.fcsh.unl.pt/encyclopedia/entimema/>. My translation.

<sup>290</sup> *Rhetoric*, Book II.22. In Roberts, *Rhetoric*, 115.

<sup>291</sup> *The Gospel of Mary of Magdala* 4.8.

Savior said."<sup>292</sup> The example, along with the enthymeme and the maxim, is a form of persuasive argumentation proof.

Apart from argumentation, Levi employs the appeal to the character of the orator ("The Savior made her worthy"<sup>293</sup>) and to emotion as rhetorical strategies. When criticizing Peter ("You have always been a wrathful person"<sup>294</sup>), Levi evokes Peter's relapse behavior – provoking the audience to feel Anger. "The persons with whom we get angry are those (...) who speak ill of us and show contempt for us, in connection with the things we ourselves most care about: thus those who are eager to win fame as philosophers get angry with those who show contempt for their philosophy."<sup>295</sup>

Levi also appeals to emotions related to Friendship/Enmity when he associates Peter with those who hurt Christians and, therefore, indirectly hurt the audience themselves. Ultimately, he appeals to Shame by pointing Peter's moral badness due to cowardice – in classic rhetoric a trait of those who give up or run away<sup>296</sup> and in the Bible associated to Peter's denial of Christ and attitude face the missionaries sent by James.<sup>297</sup>

Moreover, concerning biblical rhetoric, the *Gospel of Mary of Magdala* shows parallels with the canonical gospels, such as the call for the disciples to continue the work of Jesus<sup>298</sup> and Jesus' common expressions ("Anyone with two ears capable of hearing should listen!")<sup>299</sup>. It even includes an opposition parallel to the Gospel of Matthew. Where the canonical reads that the treasure is where the heart is (6.21), the *Gospel of Mary of Magdala* opposes a counterpart: "For where the mind is, there is the treasure.'

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<sup>292</sup> *The Gospel of Mary of Magdala* 10.11-13.

<sup>293</sup> *The Gospel of Mary of Magdala* 10.9.

<sup>294</sup> *The Gospel of Mary of Magdala* 10.7.

<sup>295</sup> *Rhetoric*, Book II.2. In Roberts, *Rhetoric*, 73.

<sup>296</sup> *Rhetoric*, Book II.6. In Roberts, 85.

<sup>297</sup> Matthew 26.69-75 and Galatians 2.11-14.

<sup>298</sup> Mark 16.15, Matthew 28.19.

<sup>299</sup> *The Gospel of Mary of Magdala* 3.13.

Finally, a distinct trait in the rhetoric of the *Gospel of Mary of Magdala* is resorting to the body as a metaphor. In his opening teaching, the Savior says: “[Ma]tter gav[e bi]rth to a passion which has no Image because it derives from what is contrary to nature. A disturbing confusion then occurred in the whole body.”<sup>300</sup>

Cameron explains that “the language of the physical body” had been prominent since the Pauline rhetoric of the resurrection (I Cor 15:39-44) and continued as central in second and third-centuries Christian writings, especially in the issue of sexual intercourse. However, in the *Gospel of Mary of Magdala*, the central discussion lies on the relations of the body, the soul, and the spirit. Specifically, in how seeking spiritual advancement must transcend the body and its issues, including gender.

As King notes, a contemporary feminist interpretation of the text could argue that advocating for the disregard of gender could create invisibility and silence women experiences. But that is not at all the case of the *Gospel of Mary of Magdala*.<sup>301</sup>

“But transcendence is not bought at the expense of ignoring or erasing awareness of injustice and suffering. Instead, the ideal of transcendence is tied to a sharp criticism of social injustice and illegitimate domination. In Mary’s vision of the rise of the soul, spiritual power is depicted as the empowerment of the enslaved soul in its (successful) battle against the forces of ignorance, jealousy, lust, wrath, an illegitimate domination. The work’s resolution of conflict ties the erasure of difference to the simultaneous elimination of injustice and suffering. Transcendence and justice are linked, so that authority is based on spiritual maturity rather than bodily differentiations”<sup>302</sup>

Moreover, the teaching of Mary of Magdala is interesting because it carries both mythological and metaphorical potential readings. It does so by naming the components of human emotions and spiritual character as entities (the soul, the Power, and the Desire – with a capital letter for proper names) and by using these entities in a cosmogenic and

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<sup>300</sup> *The Gospel of Mary of Magdala* 3.10-11.

<sup>301</sup> She discusses the rhetoric of the body in King, “Prophetic Power and Women’s Authority: The Case of Mary of Magdala”; King, *The Gospel of Mary of Magdala*, 37–48.

<sup>302</sup> King, “Prophetic Power and Women’s Authority: The Case of Mary of Magdala,” 32.



eschatological narrative. The rhetoric purpose of Christian myths and metaphors is not only to express concepts that cannot be fully achieved by logic. It is also to “make possible an acceptable presentation of Christian ideas to outsiders,” that is, to use figurative imagery as a Christian myth acceptable to a pagan audience.<sup>303</sup>

Considering the gnostic context of the *Gospel of Mary of Magdala*, it is also probable that Mary of Magdala’s teaching is related to Greek philosophy, namely to Plato’s theory of the soul. King acknowledges this possible interface in Platonic and Stoic ideas.<sup>304</sup>

“By the time the *Gospel of Mary* was written, ideas from Platonists and Stoics had permeated popular culture in the eastern Mediterranean in much the same way that we modern Americans are all armchair psychologists, talking about childhood traumas, neuroses, and complexes whether or not we’ve ever actually read Freud. To greater or lesser degrees the ideas of these thinkers had become removed from their earlier literary and intellectual contexts.”<sup>305</sup>

I will not go into the details here because it is not my goal to verify possible links between the *Gospel of Mary of Magdala* and Greek philosophy, but I do mark it as an indicator of how vastly pedagogical concerns might have shaped early Christian rhetoric.

### **5.3. Women’s rhetoric in the *Acts of Paul***

The *Acts of Paul and Thecla* are a particular portion within the *Acts of Paul*. It is uncertain if it once circulated independently and was later edited into a larger collection,<sup>306</sup> but it has the particularity to be much more focused on Thecla than on Paul. In the overall reading of the *Acts of Paul*, this extract serves the purpose to create a motive for the persecution and later martyrdom of the apostle: the corruption of young women.

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<sup>303</sup> Cameron, *Christianity and the Rhetoric of Empire*, 65.

<sup>304</sup> King, *The Gospel of Mary of Magdala*, 49–68.

<sup>305</sup> King, 43.

<sup>306</sup> Elliott, *The Apocryphal New Testament*, 2007, 352.

Virginia Burrus argues that chaste women, not the apostles, are the protagonists of the apocryphal acts.<sup>307</sup> She comes to that conclusion through a literary analysis in which she notes that these stories are structured around women's actions and that the narrative conflict starts and ends in the battle between the women and their husbands or the rulers. The apostles leave the scene before the end of the story. Their function would be close to that of a "donor," a common figure in folk tales that give the heroine something enabling her to triumph. With that in mind, I daresay that the *Acts of Paul and Thecla* is essentially a biography of Thecla, telling her life story.

According to Cameron, the prevalence of biographies in early Christian rhetoric draws on a literary background of pagan *Lives* to create a pedagogical device to teach a Christian behavioral model.<sup>308</sup> To that, I add the importance of spiritual biography in the Old Testament (in the stories of Moses, Abraham, and other prophets), in the canonical gospels (presenting a biography of Jesus), in the apocryphal gospels of Jesus' infancy and family (as the *Gospel of the Birth of Mary*), in martyrdom accounts and in the Christian *Lives*.

Moreover, late antique and medieval biographies of female saints such as Thecla and Perpetua hold a claim for truth that should not be overlooked in the face of its miraculous and hyperbolic depictions. Thomas J. Heffernan calls attention to the fact that ancient biographers had an understanding of History that is not as tied to facts and objectivity as our contemporary understanding.<sup>309</sup> Making history was to them to set a brief record of an event, and this record should incentivize the reader to imitate the good in it. Therefore, making history was fundamentally persuasive. Also, in the ancient biographer's perspective, every event, every fact in this world was sanctioned by God,

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<sup>307</sup> Burrus, *Chastity as Autonomy*, 42–44.

<sup>308</sup> Cameron, *Christianity and the Rhetoric of Empire*, 47.

<sup>309</sup> Heffernan, *Sacred Biography*, 66–71.

which made the boundaries between fact and fantasy unimportant. From that, we can conclude that the biographical structure of the *Acts of Paul* (and also of Perpetua's account and the *Acts of Thomas*) reinforces Thecla's presentation as a model for "real" Christian women and as an incentive to women's prophecy.

Another feature of the apocryphal acts highlighted by Cameron is the degree of self-consciousness they display towards speech, preaching, and language.<sup>310</sup> Thecla sits by the window and at the apostle's feet for days just to listen to him. Her attitude is similar to Martha's, sister of Mary, who sat at Jesus' feet and was praised by him for valuing knowledge and adoration, "the best part," in opposition to her sister who took charge of mundane tasks.<sup>311</sup> It is the spoken word that converts women in all the apocryphal acts.<sup>312</sup>

I see this trait as an emphasis on women's relation to orality more than to the written word. That is the case of Thecla, Tryphaena, the princess-bride and Mygdonia - and the fact that they use the prophetic inspiration to speak also reinforces how women used it to do their own work as preachers and teachers.

Looking specifically at Thecla's sentences, I identified no direct relation to classical rhetoric. Excepting for a speech in the arena, Thecla's sayings are short and do not unfold as proper discourses, with Narration and Argumentation. The same can be said about her vision and about Tryphaena's dream.<sup>313</sup> Only the character of the orator is explored throughout her story, as she is presented as modest and virtuous. But since my analysis focuses on women's speech, I will not go into the details.

A longer speech is given by Thecla at the arena when the governor asks her why the beasts do not touch her.<sup>314</sup> Her response sounds more of a praise (epideictic genre)

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<sup>310</sup> Cameron, *Christianity and the Rhetoric of Empire*, 94.

<sup>311</sup> Luke 10.38-42.

<sup>312</sup> Burrus, *Chastity as Autonomy*, 34. lists common features of the apocryphal acts.

<sup>313</sup> Acts of Paul and Thecla, paras. 21 and 28.

<sup>314</sup> Acts of Paul and Thecla, para. 37.

than a forensic speech since she does not intend to make a defense case. At this point in the story, the governor already freed her and just wanted to know what happened out of amazement and curiosity. Her response is not prophetic (because it does not represent communication with the divine) but uses biblical rhetoric to talk about Christ listing his qualities: “He is a refuge to the tempest-tossed, a solace to the afflicted, shelter to the despairing.” The use of lists is common both in the Old and the New Testament.<sup>315</sup> She also paraphrases the Bible by introducing Jesus as “the Son of God in whom he is well pleased”.<sup>316</sup> Additionally, Thecla performs several miracles, such as not being hurt by fire or by beasts. The description of miracles is also an early Christian rhetorical strategy to show “the symbolic interface of human and divine.”<sup>317</sup>

In the Acts of Paul and Thecla, Myrte is the woman who undoubtedly performs an inspired speech under the ecstasy of the Holy Spirit.<sup>318</sup> In this occasion, she reveals the success of Paul’s mission in Rome. Unfortunately, the manuscript only allows us to access scattered extracts, and it is not possible to make further evaluations about the biblical rhetoric and figurative allusions Myrte’s episode might have.

#### **5.4. Women’s rhetoric in the *Acts of Thomas***

In biblical literature, the genre of the Acts reunites stories of the disciples of Jesus in their teaching and missionary work. Naturally, the *Acts of Thomas* is filled with speeches and stories about Judas Thomas, but I will concentrate my analysis on the specific passages about women: the princess-bride, Mygdonia, Mnesara, and their prophetic experiences. On the manner of the Bible, these Acts are organized in small sections that make sense separately.

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<sup>315</sup> Wilder, *Early Christian Rhetoric*, 27–28.

<sup>316</sup> Mat 3.17; 17.5 and Luke 3.22

<sup>317</sup> Cameron, *Christianity and the Rhetoric of Empire*, 60.

<sup>318</sup> IX Fragment: Scene of farewell. Consulted in: James, “The Acts of Paul.”

The first of these passages covers the vision that the princess-bride had of Jesus and her following speech.<sup>319</sup> Both Jesus' and the princess' speeches match the epideictic genre as they praise for virtue, prudence, and wisdom. Her speech is also inserted into a broader dialogue that she has with the king and the queen, which emphasizes her teaching role.

From classical rhetoric, the text borrows the use of examples as an argumentative strategy when Jesus is explaining the difference between biological and spiritual children. The first are "possessed by demons," "lunatics or half-withered or crippled or deaf or dumb or paralytics or idiots." The latter are "untouched by these hurtful things," which allows the couple who opts for spiritual children to live "without care, spending an untroubled life, free from grief and care."

The text also appeals to Shamelessness as an emotional persuasive strategy. To Aristotle, Shamelessness is the exact opposite of Shame, which is defined by cowardice, by not performing as expected from someone from our social or economic condition, and by caring about other people's opinion.<sup>320</sup> When the princess appears joyful and defiant because she is "no longer ashamed or abashed, since the work of shame and bashfulness has been removed from me," she defines her new state as opposed to a state of Shame. Where there was cowardice, now there is the courage to be outspoken and unveiled. Where there was the expectation to continue her parent's tradition, she follows a distinct path. Where there was anxiety because of the opinion of others, she does not fear the reaction of others to her conversion. The issue of Shame is also presented in a metaphor, as the "mirror of shame has been taken away from me."

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<sup>319</sup> *The Acts of Thomas*, paras. 12 and 14. All the quotations about the princess bride are from these paragraphs.

<sup>320</sup> Rhetoric II.6. In Roberts, *Rhetoric*, 85–89.

A second metaphor is used to explain her conversion in terms of marriage to Christ. He is a “true husband” to whom she joined “in a different marriage” in opposition to her “temporary husband.” The identification of the conversion as a spiritual marriage is not only metaphorical but grounded on biblical rhetoric, where the Church is presented as the bride of Christ.<sup>321</sup> Many readings can be done here – an eternal commitment, the replacement of social and family bonds for a spiritual community, the surpassing of the body in favor of the elevation of the spirit (which is typical of Mary of Magdala's teaching), etc. Despite the symbolic dimension of the act, the reasons presented in the text here are quite pragmatic and, to a certain extent, selfish. In a society that extremely valued motherhood and had a high mortality and postpartum complications rate for parturient and children, the Savior proposes health and well-being. It is the exchange of a life determined by health problems and the care of others for a life of autonomy and the care of self.<sup>322</sup> In his words, “being released from afflictions and troubles, known and unknown, and you will be not involved in the cares of life and of children, whose end is destruction.”

Surely the "untroubled life" he promises would be filled by religious work – teaching, preaching, converting. However, these tasks and responsibilities are not highlighted yet. At this point, the speech highlights only the gains in a rhetorical effort to emphasize the persuasive parts and soften the ones who may bring discomfort to the audience. In their rhetorical strategies and intention, the princess' vision and teaching are apologetic of ascetic Christianity.

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<sup>321</sup> This metaphor has a long tradition on the Old Testament, where the alliance between God and the Hebrew people is seen as a spousal relationship. The prophetic ministry of Hosea focuses on this image. Also, it is presented in the gospel of Jon, in the episode of the wedding at Cana (John 2), in the Pauline letters (2 Cor 11.2, Eph 5.27) and in Revelation (19.7).

<sup>322</sup> Foucault, *The History of Sexuality. Vol. 3.* argues that caring and knowing oneself is fundamental on ancient ethics, especially on Greek philosophical thought. The care of the self benefits not only oneself, but also others and the world that will be impacted by a personal evolution. Ascetic practices would play a fundamental role in this personal care.

In the second prophetic episode of the *Acts of Thomas*, Mygdonia interprets her husband's dream and actions.<sup>323</sup> While he tells her the situations that he is going through in detail; she answers in short sentences. Her sayings characterize neither speeches nor teachings. There is no Statement of Case, narration, or argumentation. Instead, their short-length resembles simple divination. According to Wilder, in early Christian rhetoric, religious revelation is usually short while persuasion is longer.<sup>324</sup>

In one of her divinations, Mygdonia uses a maxim: "From a bad thing comes the better." The maxims are similar to proverbs. They are described by Aristotle as an instrument to impress dulls,<sup>325</sup> and their adoption may reinforce the husband's spiritual and intellectual inferiority *vis à vis* the wife (already described as superior in intelligence, money, and morality<sup>326</sup>). This passage does not appeal to emotion, nor does it resort to the character of the orator, although Mygdonia's character is built as morally good throughout the text.

The third prophetic episode concerns Mnesara's vision of a man that leads her in the direction of other Christians.<sup>327</sup> In this episode, I identified neither classical nor biblical rhetoric specific features. However, the simple literary occurrence of a vision is characteristic of Christian rhetoric as a defense of "the primacy of faith" over logic.<sup>328</sup>

### 5.5. Which rhetoric?

In my analysis of women's prophetic speech, I sought to perceive the uses of Aristotelian rhetorical strategies and tried to recognize general patterns of expression. In Table 5, I summarize the discoveries divided into classical rhetoric, biblical rhetoric, and

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<sup>323</sup> The *Acts of Thomas*, paras. 91-92. All the quotes about Mygdonia are from these paragraphs.

<sup>324</sup> Wilder, *Early Christian Rhetoric*, 21.

<sup>325</sup> Book 2, 22. Alexandre Júnior, Alberto, and Pena, *Retórica*, 152.

<sup>326</sup> *Acts of Thomas*, para. 95.

<sup>327</sup> *Acts of Thomas*, paras.154-155.

<sup>328</sup> Cameron, *Christianity and the Rhetoric of Empire*, 49.

early Christian rhetoric. While the first draw on Aristotle, the second shows references to the Old Testament or the canonical New Testament writings, and the latter gathers the elements identified by Cameron and Wilder as typical of this period. Although early Christian rhetoric certainly display biblical or classical themes, its composition has independent meanings and is not a simple repetition of old stories. Evidently some rhetorical strategies and metaphorical references have been left out of y analysis. The texts have a rich cultural imagery. The apocryphal acts, for their extension and diversity of characters, were not analyzed integrally, but only in the sections dedicated to women and their prophetic experiences.

I also did not intend to separate Greek and Jewish elements in the composition of ancient Christian discourse either. My intention was simply to verify if these elements were used at all. If so, to check what they reveal about Christian's and women prophets' strategies to insert themselves in the ancient Mediterranean society.

TABLE 5. Rhetoric of women's prophetic speech

	<b>Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas</b>	<b>Gospel of Mary of Magdala</b>	<b>Acts of Thomas</b>	<b>Acts of Paul</b>
<b>Literary Genres</b>	Martyrdom account Epideictic Forensic	Gospel Dialogue Epideictic Deliberative	Dialogue Apologetic Epideictic	Apologetic Biography
<b>Classical rhetoric</b>	Structure Orator's character Emotion – anger, indignation, friendship, pity	Orator's character Emotion – anger, enmity Argument – example, enthymeme	Orator's character (indirectly) Emotion – shame Argument – example, maxim	Orator's character (indirectly)
<b>Biblical rhetoric</b>	Parallelism in OT and NT	Parallelism in NT	Parallelism in NT Independent sections	Parallelism in OT and NT Lists
<b>Early Christian rhetoric</b>	Vision Metaphor Allegory	Vision Metaphor Myth	Vision Metaphor Orality	Vision Miracle Metaphor Orality



To begin with, I have noticed that all texts adopt biblical references, as well as metaphors, visions, and miraculous events. There are associations to the Old Testament and, predominantly, to the New Testament. According to Cameron, references to the Old Testament in early Christian literature may have served the purpose to present Jewish traditions to Christians converts from a pagan background.<sup>329</sup> However, this does not seem to be the case here, since the references are undescriptive, symbolic and not likely to be understood by someone who does not know their Old Testament counterparts.

It is most likely in those texts that biblical references were a tool of validation in the textual disputes among Christian groups. As orthodoxy develops, one or another theological tendency appears to be more valid and true as it is able to show links to the apostolic tradition or to Judaism. The Old Testament parallels are stronger in Perpetua's discourse, an author that demonstrates awareness of her role within a tradition of continuity since she asks for a written report of her martyrdom. If she is a Montanist,<sup>330</sup> and therefore a member of a group under orthodox attack, the links with the imagery of the Old Testament in her prophetic speech end up being validating tools of this prophecy. The same would apply even if she is a member of another Christian group. Just as Jesus relied on prophecies about the Messiah to validate his identity, Perpetua and others could have used Hebrew elements to validate their prophecies too.

Mentions to the Old Testament occur discreetly in the *Acts of Paul and Thecla* while mentions to the New Testament are more frequent. In a well-accepted thesis, Dennis MacDonald argues that Thecla's story represents one side of a battle in the reception of Paul's teachings about women's authority and chastity.<sup>331</sup> The other side that has gained

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<sup>329</sup> Cameron, 38.

<sup>330</sup> Butler, "The new prophecy and 'new visions': evidence of Montanism in the passion of Perpetua and Felicitas."

<sup>331</sup> MacDonald, *The Legend and the Apostle*.

more recognition would be represented in the pseudo-Pauline letters of *Titus* and *Timothy*. The correlation is stressed by the presence of the same characters such as Demas, Hermogenes, and Phygelus in both corpora with distinct attitudes. These characters do not, however, participate in the episodes strictly linked to women's prophecy.

In its turn, the texts of Thomas and Mary of Magdala only show parallels to New Testament phrases and expressions. Because they come from Gnostic circles, their bond to Stoic or Platonic ideas might be stronger than to the Jewish background.

It is also worth noting that the occurrence of New Testament paraphrases in all four texts, despite their different theological and geographical backgrounds, reveal common elements to different Christian groups. Since these texts were produced before the formation of the canon in communities relatively isolated from each other<sup>332</sup> we can eliminate the hypothesis that they seek to forge characteristics of the canonical tradition. Instead, the common narrative elements may indicate a common oral background between different Christian groups.

Another trait the texts have in common is the frequent occurrence of visions or miracles and, formally, the use of metaphors. The use of such figurative imagery is, according to Cameron and Wilder, fundamental expressions of Christian rhetoric as a vehicle for thoughts and non-rational expressions to be expressed in textuality. Their occurrence is not gendered, as it happens in both men and women stories. They are also adopted in Patristic writings.<sup>333</sup>

Wilder's work is theological and carried on with the partiality of a believer. He points out that the use of myths and images may have put Christians at risk of being

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<sup>332</sup> Textual history is detailed in chapter I, p. 17-18.

<sup>333</sup> Cameron, *The Rhetoric of the Empire*, notes its prevalence in discourses up to the 6<sup>th</sup> century in authors such as Augustine, Jerome and Gregory of Nyssa; Wilder, *Early Christian Rhetoric*, observes it in the canonic gospels.

contaminated by pagan mythology. But that the risk was worth taking since these symbols carried a strong pedagogical potential:

“We need to be reminded that in all cultures men live by images. The meaning of things, the coherence of the world, its continuities, values and goals, all these are established for the multitudes and for societies of men by this or that world-picture or myths, with its associated emblems, archetypes, paradigms, fables, heroes, cults. (...) The Early Christian Church was at grips in the presence of syncretism and Gnosticism (...) yet the gospel went forth and clothed with familiar imagery and myth indispensable for evoking the cosmic and cultural significance of the claims put forward.”<sup>334</sup>

Using a historical approach, Cameron comes to a similar conclusion. Myth, symbol, and figurative imagery presented through visions, miracles, and metaphorical language figures were the vehicle used for presenting, explaining, and setting a favorable environment to the acceptance of Christianity throughout the Empire. This understanding was fundamental to the post-Constantine institutional changes that would ensure Christianity’s prevalence politically. Prophecy is, therefore, fundamental to the penetration of this new religion in the imaginary and even in the political structures of the Empire.

The prevalence of dialogue is also a frequent element in prophetic speech. Dialogue, as already mentioned, is a typical vehicle in both Jewish and Greek rhetoric of teaching appropriated in early Christianity as a pedagogical strategy, even when the intention is to convey a consolidated stance and not actually debate it.

But dialogue is a characteristic form of expression of women prophets as well: Perpetua, Mary, and the princess-bride not only receive visions and pass them on, but also debate them; Tryphaena and Mnesara do not discuss the content of their visions, but transmit the message received through dialogues. Even moments of miracles and visions – characteristic of a symbolism and an irrationality that supposedly cannot be put into

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<sup>334</sup> Wilder, *Early Christian Rhetoric*, 121.

words – are filled with dialogues, talks, lectures, and activities of persuasion. The prophetic role of a transmitter, therefore, seems to be strongly linked to this form of expression. The different roles a prophet may play – diviner, teacher, preacher – merge in the dialogical structure.

Considering the educational environment of the Roman Empire in the second and third century – with a strong demarcation between a literate elite and an uneducated mass<sup>335</sup> – the use of dialogues also reveals the importance of orality in Christian transmission. People converted mostly through preaching. And since women were less educated than men,<sup>336</sup> orality must have played even a bigger role in women's teaching and conversion. Moreover, considering the historical background of the *Martyrdom of Perpetua* and of the apocryphal acts,<sup>337</sup> we can infer that prophecy played a fundamental role in the spread of the Christian message.

Finally, the use of classical rhetoric in prophetic speech does exist but is not central. Perpetua and the princess-bride, especially, adopt elements of Aristotle's rhetoric in their sayings, but not during inspired speech and ecstasy moments. Most passages of the texts that lay heavily on rhetorical strategies are contributions of the editor (in Perpetua's case), and descriptions of other characters or even of women. Therefore, classical rhetoric is important to the transmission and pedagogical action of the texts, but it is not a distinctive trait of prophetic speech in itself.

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<sup>335</sup> Cameron, *Christianity and the Rhetoric of Empire*, 30.

<sup>336</sup> Keener, "Women's Education and Public Speech in Antiquity," 749–56.

<sup>337</sup> Although characters and narration may be mostly considered fictional, it is mostly accepted that the apocryphal acts have a historical background in costumes and ambience, as detailed on Chapter 1, p. 5.

## Conclusion

The analysis of the *Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas*, the *Acts of Thomas*, the *Acts of Paul*, and the *Gospel of Mary of Magdala* presented women as prophets throughout early texts. The women prophets of the examined literature communicated with the divine during ecstasies, dreams, visions, and sensorial experiences. After their experiences, they would transmit the divine message received to a greater audience. The transmission was oral, directly passed to their fellows, or indirectly passed to a later audience via written text. The content of the divine messages varied – it was either predictive, prescriptive, eschatological, judgment, or teaching.<sup>338</sup> In public transmission, the roles of prophet and teacher are proximate, indistinct.

The prophetic activity of the early second and third centuries tolerated and even promoted women's autonomy. Women prophets gained freedom of movement to circulate between private and public spheres. The role of prophet served as a justification for women's incursion into the public world, whose access once was restricted to them according to the gender roles of the Ancient Mediterranean. Women prophets maintained a morally approved character that allowed them to come back to private life (when desired) as virtuous women.

Their good behavior was also a sign of divine presence upon the prophetesses. They were approved by their Christian fellows not necessarily because their prophecies could be proven through predicted events or by miraculous public signs, but because of their character. It is their publicly acknowledged behavior as chaste or silent women that the texts emphasized. Outside moments of experiences of ecstasy, they barely spoke. The

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<sup>338</sup> Besides teaching, these are forms of speech listed as characteristic of early Christian prophecy by Aune, *Prophecy in Early Christianity and the Ancient Mediterranean World*, 327–33.

morally approved behavior is a legitimation tool that enabled them to increase their autonomy and transgress social expectations and at the same time, it is a confirmation tool that kept them from utterly transgressing gender roles.

The depiction of women prophets as silent could also be a Christian strategy to distance themselves from the pagan critique of Christian women as talkative and from the Christian response to associate women's public speech to improper teaching and false speech.<sup>339</sup> For all that, public behavior played an essential role in the acceptance of Christian women prophets. Besides personal character, the divine agency is an instrument of legitimization of women's autonomy. It justified their behavior even when it was not socially approved. To their direct audience in the texts, the perception of their prophetic agency as an instrumental agency (fundamentally passive) is essential. A classification as instrumental or independent (mixing private interests with divine action) is an interpretation of the audience.<sup>340</sup>

A good example of the use of divine agency as an instrument of legitimation is the *Gospel of Mary of Magdala*, whose central discussion revolves around the validity of women's prophetic message. In the text, Mary of Magdala only speaks to transmit her vision. Confronted by Peter, she cries and is not able to hold the discussion. Levi defends her cause and what follows is an entire debate held among men. The whole point of the argument is to show her speech as valid, but only as it comes directly from the mouth of God and not from her own. Therefore, divine agency incentivizes women's autonomy at the same time it sets a new boundary within which autonomy must be exercised.

In a contemporary interpretation, we can see evidence of an instrumental agency in the fact that women choose a particular religious practice – prophetic as well as ascetic

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<sup>339</sup> About women's association to false speech, see MacDonald, *Early Christian Women and Pagan Opinion*.

<sup>340</sup> Nissinen, "Gender and Prophetic Agency in the Ancient Near East and in Greece," 75.

– that promotes their autonomy. The predilection for a particular religious practice may indicate a personal agency that is instrumental in a prophetic context. That is possible since instrumental and independent agency is not mutually exclusive.

In an article about virgin martyrs, Robert Mills adverted that when posing contemporary questions to ancient sources, there is always “the risk – and the possibility – that we ventriloquize our own concerns” when we make women only accessible through texts “speak.” To avoid that, one should avoid totalizing assumptions or dichotomic affirmations: placing women simply as empowered or oppressed, agent or recipient, instrumental or independent.<sup>341</sup> That is the case for prophetic agency. At the same time, as it enables women’s autonomy, it also sets boundaries for it.

Regarding the form of public prophetic speech, there is no unifying feature that represents prophetic speech in a formula. They all use figurative imagery (metaphors, descriptions of visions and dreams) and dialogue – which have been identified as fundamental elements of early Christian rhetoric.<sup>342</sup> To a greater or lesser degree, early women prophets also used elements of classical rhetoric and biblical rhetoric. In the Gnostic texts (*Acts of Thomas* and *Gospel of Mary of Magdala*) there are no strong links to the Old Testament. In all four analyzed texts, there were references to New Testament writings. Because the texts were written before the establishment of the canon, these elements may present common forms of early Christian stories that circulated in oral tradition.

Concerning classical rhetoric, persuasive strategies appear mostly on the stories of Mary of Magdala and Perpetua, not particularly in their sayings but in the overall construction of the text. In Perpetua’s account, there is a clear difference in the styles of writing attributed to her and to her editor, which reinforces the double authorship.

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<sup>341</sup> Mills, “Can the Virgin Martyr Speak?,” 201.

<sup>342</sup> Cameron, *Christianity and the Rhetoric of Empire*; Wilder, *Early Christian Rhetoric*.

Throughout the texts, the presence of rhetorical elements was uneven and does not reveal a particular form of expression of early Christian female prophetic speech. Broader research can make these patterns, if there are any, more visible.

It is possible to apply these findings to historical situations, even though the sources analyzed are literary constructs. That is a complicated task that in this thesis has the additional challenge of dealing with a diverse group of sources with a complicated textual history: their geographic origins are still somewhat obscure and there is little information about the milieu. However, by relying on the historical evidence for Perpetua's authorship<sup>343</sup> and studies about women in the apocryphal Acts<sup>344</sup>, it is possible to affirm that to a certain extent these writings reveal women's practices and the relationship of these practices with a movement of emancipation.

Nonetheless, some details are missing: was there a preference for these particular practices over others? Would all women relate to prophecy in the same way? How do geographical origins, ethnicity, age, and class operate among women prophets? These are issues that can be addressed in a future study.

For now, the present study was organized into two major components. The first was to establish if women's prophecy appeared in the selected early texts. The women prophets may depict miraculous and supernatural experiences but were these merely sporadic, isolated episodes or was there something that would unite these experiences under a common dome? I established that texts from different geographies and dates (150 - 250 C.E) portrayed a shared experience that changed the social and religious status of women and constituted a common phenomenon.

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<sup>343</sup> Moss, *Ancient Christian Martyrdom*, 132–34.

<sup>344</sup> Burrus, *Chastity as Autonomy*; Davies, *The Revolt of the Widows*; Davis, *The Cult of Saint Thecla*; Kraemer, "Thecla of Iconium, Reconsidered."



The second component was to understand how women's prophecy was organized. What were their characteristic modes of expression? What did they convey? Did they function as a vehicle for the female voice that otherwise would have been erased in the history of the primitive church (a history written by men whose female representations mostly reveal masculine constructions on the feminine<sup>345</sup>)? Is women's prophecy a privileged space to access ancient women's narrative?

These questions have been partially answered. A more comprehensive study could help clarify patterns of expressions. Moreover, it could clarify formal linguistic issues that could establish oral prophecy as a place for women's expression in opposition to the written world of men. In an environment where women were less educated and had less access to written means of production, speaking was the primary tool for women. How much of this oral tradition can we recover from popular early Christian literature? In these texts, are the oral echoes less mediatized than in the stories conceived exclusively by men?

In the introduction to *A History of Women in the West*, Duby and Perrot wrote that "The history of women is, in a certain way, the history of how they find their own voice."<sup>346</sup> Women have always had their own story, which was passed off in theatrical plays, poems, and novels written by "men who referred to themselves as *us* and to women as *them*."<sup>347</sup> The academic recovery of the female voice goes through recognizing, retrieving, and publicizing women's words, although they are (especially in the records available from antiquity) mediated by men.

In the history of Christianity, this task also passes through recovering a diversity that was erased in the battle for orthodoxy and that even the plurality fostered by the

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<sup>345</sup> Clark, "The Lady Vanishes."

<sup>346</sup> Duby and Perrot, "Escrever a história das mulheres," 10.

<sup>347</sup> Idem.

Protestant Reformation was not able to recall. What roles did women play in the ancient church? Why were they not labeled as prophetesses in early Christian literature although they performed prophets' functions, as already proven?

Possible answers were presented in Chapter 4, such as the fact that prophecy (or the manifestation of the Holy Spirit's spiritual gifts) was so trivial among early Christians that they did not pay attention to the label.<sup>348</sup> Or yet that the classification was intentionally left out of the literary fixation of stories due to Christian groups' conflicts in which the female participation generated tension and accusations of heresy. The latter possibility is more plausible, but this point deserves further consideration in future research. A particularized look to proto-orthodox authors such as Tertullian, Eusebius, and Epiphanius may indicate the weight of women's charismatic leadership in internal accusations. Another consideration is if the response of accused groups indeed occurred in terms of formal silencing in an attempt to alleviate differences.

Finally, in a broader social perspective, academic works about the participation of women in early Christianity offer new insights for the discussions about women's roles at the church today and indirectly, for how these churches orient women's participation in society at large. Issues such as women's ordination, institutional leadership, and equity between men and women in the family sphere are still current. In nations such as Portugal and Brazil, they are largely based on a religious discourse that interferes in the secular world.

Besides, the recovery work of the plurality of early Christianity disengages the religious discourse of Christianity as a single tradition that guards an absolute truth that excludes other religious traditions. Such concepts foster religious intolerance. Knowing that even Christianity was not single in its view, in turn, opens space for tolerance to

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<sup>348</sup> Aune, *Prophecy in Early Christianity and the Ancient Mediterranean World*, 200–201.

diverse religious expressions and thoughts. More importantly, it celebrates the richness in religious diversity.

For these reasons, working with popular early Christian literature, alternative forms of Christianity and underrepresented historical categories, such as women, do not merely serve a curious recovery from the past. Rather, it fosters an appreciation for diverse religious manifestations that can turn into an attitude of religious tolerance and into insights about the conflicts of the world we live in today.

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